

GONZO THEOLOGY:  
ADVENTURE MOTORCYCLING AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF PILGRIMAGE

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## PROLOGUE AND INTRODUCTION

Gonzo Journalism, a style of journalism developed, championed, and made popular by Louisville, Kentucky native, Hunter S. Thompson, involves the process where the journalist lives and experiences first-hand the story upon which is being reported. But not only does the journalist live and experience the story, the journalist also becomes a central character in the plot development. Objectivity is unabashedly replaced by subjectivity, wit, sarcasm, emotion, and often, profanity.

Probably, the quintessential example of gonzo journalism is Thompson's account of living, riding, drinking, and fighting with the notorious Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club in Northern, CA.<sup>1</sup> Thompson experienced what the Hell's Angels experienced, rode where they rode, drank where they drank, and fought where they fought. He became a Hell's Angel almost as fully as one could become one.

I do theology and religion, like Hunter S. Thompson does journalism in his book about the infamous Hell's Angels. Religious experience and faith requires us to be open, dynamic, and vulnerable to change. Like Thompson assumed the role of a Hell's Angel, authentic religious life requires us to be open to various religious experiences and to new relationships and to new beliefs. We must be willing to sacrifice who we are, to become someone new. And like Thompson's time with the Hell's change his life's trajectory, so

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<sup>1</sup>Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (New York, NY: The Random House Publishing Group, 1966).

too will ours be changed with these experiences. We must do Gonzo Theology, live with and among members from diverse backgrounds and diverse beliefs, and we must write ourselves into God's story and become a main character in its unfolding. Gonzo Theology is subjective, experiential, and relational. Gonzo Theology urges us to wander in search of spiritual transformation, not with a biased outcome or schedule or destination in mind, but to truly welcome the experience and embrace how we are changed by it.

This gonzo-esque masterpiece recounts three motorcycle pilgrimages over several years where I travel to various holy sites and religious communities, searching and wandering, open to change, growth, and transformation.

The first pilgrimage, *Embarking on Adventure*, occurring after my acceptance to the doctoral program at New York Theological Seminary but prior to its first on-site class session, recounts a test-run for this pilgrimage project. I had just gotten married and left a great job to follow my wife to Michigan, so there definitely was some transition and resentment, but mostly it was a vacation, a cause. I wanted to see what I could see, enjoy myself and maybe learn something along the way.

At that time, I aimed to visit a religious community in each state and record my experiences. I tentatively called it The 50 Faiths 50 States Project. This original idea focused more on advocacy and spreading awareness for the cause religious diversity and interfaith cooperation. Thankfully holding much more promise and authenticity, the project later evolved into a wandering, spiritual pilgrimage with minimal scheduling or planning. It was open and free, post-modern, without the bias of achieving a certain outcome and following a certain schedule.

But it became clear from the first day, that following a planned schedule and attempting to raise “awareness” seemed forced and disingenuous. My spirit, my soul seemed stifled. And I realized that raising awareness is a misnomer because in Gonzo Theology I am part of the story, I am interwoven in the lives of these people I meet. I’m not raising awareness of diversity—I am religious diversity. I am caught up in authentic religiously diverse relationships and the road makes that possible.

There exist several major problems with visiting a different world religion in each state and reporting my experiences to raise awareness to counteract a perceived lack of religious awareness in America. First, it posits me as a tourist, someone going to a place and reporting on its exotic and variant religious culture. I am using these communities to reinforce my privilege, satisfy my rich white-boy guilt so that I can feel good about myself. Further, it’s not real, it’s not complex, it’s not true to go around like Diana Eck<sup>2</sup> and describe the meaningful and wonderful aspects of each religious community around the USA. Religious diversity isn’t a children’s book of characteristics, beliefs, and cultural norms naively and hollowly presented, saying “Wow. I bet you didn’t know how religiously diverse America is. Look! Isn’t it great? I bet you didn’t know how neat they all are. I bet you feel stupid for being a conservative, fundamentalist, gun-toting-to-church, Chick Fil-A eating, Baptist from the South-East. America isn’t Baptists and bald eagles, the USA is the most religiously diverse nation in the world.”

While Eck is correct in saying that religious diversity is ubiquitous in America, it’s also a tapestry interwoven in complexity and chaos, both life-affirming and destructive and everything in between. The idea of World Religions, the categorical

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001).

method of organization Eck uses, may even be a Western privileged construct, proliferating a biased European Universalism in its language. “This new system of counting the religions replaced the hierarchy of nations”<sup>3</sup> creating an “othering” of other religious cultures, attempting to “distinguish the West from the rest.”<sup>4</sup>

So in this first pilgrimage, I realized I must not be the Protestant Universalist European American that distinguishes himself by having the privilege to travel around and point to all these “other” religions in a cage, saying “aren’t they cute!” I must not be the one mumbling under my breath “Protestant Pluralism is God’s gift to the world because I am able to go around and tell people about these other religions. I don’t think they are going to hell. I’m so open. But I also think I am much more civilized and evolved than they are, precisely because I am going around pointing out how open to diversity I am.”

In addition to dealing with transition and for adventure and fun, looking back, I couldn’t see where I was or who I was at this point in my life. I had yet to solidify my career in ministry. I had just gotten married and didn’t know who I was as a husband at that time. Most importantly, I didn’t know who God was and who I was in relation to God. And there was this creeping loneliness that just wouldn’t subside.

The second pilgrimage, The Testing of Adventure, Transformation, occurred out of necessity prior to the second year of the doctoral program. It began more as an escape, rather than a pure spiritual pilgrimage. A personal crisis drove me on a sojourn searching for the healing road. At its heart, this pilgrimage captured a glimpse of the true human

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<sup>3</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, 2.

experience and the journey of faith. The turmoil I experienced brought about a profound spiritual transformation that serves as a foundation to my new identity.

I was stripped of those things that define me: my marriage, my job, my home. Deep and painful questions arose out of my Jobian despair. Do I even want to be a minister? Do I believe in God? How can my marriage be over? I am scared of getting divorced, will I be able to incorporate that into my new identity? Mostly, I felt an unfathomable loneliness, an all-consuming darkness. This despair served as the catalyst to begin seeking answers to these questions. I realized at a certain point things weren't merely happening to me, providence and grace were interwoven with the seemingly chaotic nature of events. The stripping of things that defined me served as a necessary aspect of the pilgrimage, so that, transformation could ensue.

The final and farthest pilgrimage, Circuital Grace, Coming Home, served as my true demonstration project for my doctorate. With 12,600 miles of travel, this pilgrimage attempts to recapture the lost spiritual art of aimless spiritual wandering which was original to the early church and was recaptured throughout the middle ages, but which largely seems missing from today's fearful, complacent, homogenous, and rigid belief-driven orthodoxy. Modern Christianity attempts to achieve a narrow, isolated truth and remains in that bordered-off silo in hopes to preserve its righteousness. Uncertainty and new experiences become an enemy of faith, diversity of thought and experience is viewed with hostility, and homogeneity of community increases shallow and dangerous prejudice. I reclaim the wandering spirituality of the early church and the medieval monastics to truly experience authentic spiritual transformation and engage in the vital act of pilgrimage. I argue that this act not only transforms the life of the traveler, but

truly and deeply creates faith. Possibly, going out beyond yourself and your community, crossing boundaries and witnessing new experiences maybe the only true spiritual act that creates and builds faith in an individual.

During this final pilgrimage, there was a conscious awareness and affirmation that this was a spiritual pilgrimage. At some point, I finally understood why I had been going on these pilgrimages for so long. Somewhere along the way, before I physically returned home, the pilgrimage was over. I was at home and I was at peace. I knew. And it wasn't that I sought closure, it's as though I had been brought to closure, by something very big outside myself. And the end was no longer where I thought it was. Maybe this is the definition of grace.

Loneliness, identity, and faith were the reasons I went out on the road, and in these areas, the road transformed me. In regards to loneliness, I redefined and found community in the different people I met on the road and they accepted me and took care of me, and that I was able to have the courage to overcome my shamefulness and shyness and speak and connect and feel good about myself. On identity, I discovered I am one who is gifted the grace of God in the form of a second chance or a new start, and even that isn't guaranteed, so I learned that I would always have the road, the journey—so at my most fundamental, I learned that I am a traveler, pilgrim. And in regards to faith, I realized the only way to live it, to create it, to grow in it, is to go out and do it. Faith is a courageous adventure that crosses boundaries into the unknown and uncomfortable.

These three pilgrimages formed circuital paths, 3 concentric circles that taught me who I am, who God is, and who community is. And because things were stripped away, truly experiencing myself, God, and these people on the road, I was transformed.



Before I recount the narrative of these three different and important pilgrimages, I will survey the history of adventure motorcycling, remember my personal experience growing up combining motorcycling with holy travel, and explore the biblical and theological groundings of pilgrimage. This background will give my memoirs a solid foundation of context to increase my argument's perspicacity, namely, that wandering pilgrimage is central to faith creation and to spiritual transformation and must be reclaimed in 21st century Christianity in the USA. And that the freedom, creativity, and raw power of the road can inform how we do faith in our Christian institutions. What does the road look like in church? And what does the church look like on the road?

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF ADVENTURE MOTORCYCLING**

Riders have embarked upon long-distance motorcycle journeys, popularly dubbed adventure motorcycling, since the beginning of 1900s, only shortly after the motorcycle was first invented in the late 1800s. Over the last century or more, countless adventure seekers have put their mundane, office-dwelling lives on hold to experience the world on two wheels. While the theme of adventure-seeking on a motorcycle bring these sojourners together, various deeper motivations and aspirations drive the energy and desire and stand as the impetus of these trips. The testing of ability and maintenance knowledge, traveling the world, discerning one's identity and vocation, finding meaning, searching for healing in a crisis, seeking and advocating for justice, exploring spirituality, and embarking upon religious pilgrimage all posit themselves as common inspiration.

One of the earliest adventure motorcycle riders was Robert Edison Fulton, Jr. In 1932, Fulton, Jr. rode a modified Douglas twin through 22 countries over 18 months. Fulton's odyssey began as a playful, sarcastic retort while imbibing in a London pub. A friend ask him what his plans were after University. Fulton, Jr. responded jokingly, "I'm going around the world on a motorcycle!"<sup>5</sup> An executive for Douglas motorcycles happened to overhear the conversation and offered him a bike for the journey and the

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Edison Fulton, Jr, *One Man Caravan* (Center Conway, New Hampshire: Whitehorse Press, 1937), 14.

joke became a reality. Fulton, Jr. went on to describe himself as a “modern cowboy” and reflects that his trip went on to shape the rest of his life by bringing him into direct contact with people and their needs. “One of the great advantages of the motorcycle is its ability to bring its rider close to the environment—winds, weather, roads, surroundings, nature.”<sup>6</sup> Fulton, Jr. went on to become a prolific inventor and attributes his success to living life fully with keen perception, skills he developed on his Douglas twin. We will find that developing perception and perspective are shared outcomes in many motorcycle journeys and pilgrimages and often lead to deep spiritual insight. “The main thing is to see the need for something and fill it. Most people go through life looking but not really seeing.”<sup>7</sup>

Another adventure motorcyclist, Ted Simon, whose narrative, *Jupiter’s Travels*,<sup>8</sup> has inspired thousands to get on a bike and travel the world including actor Ewan McGregor, covered 78,000 miles in four years. His compelling, brutally honest, tale oscillates between authentic spiritual self-reflection and hedonistic narcissism. He discovers insights into his soul and also revels in the power of his appearance to others. In the last paragraph of his work, he writes, “Often I dream of riding over the hard red floor of a great forest, beneath a high canopy of translucent green, spreading on and on. And enchanted forest, perhaps, where men sometimes play at being gods.”<sup>9</sup> He yearned to be great at something, to be seen as a god, and in many people’s eyes, he accomplished his mission.

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<sup>6</sup> Fulton, Jr., *One Man Caravan*, xi.

<sup>7</sup> Fulton, Jr., *One Man Caravan*, 350.

<sup>8</sup> Ted Simon, *Jupiter’s Travels* (Covelo, California: Jupitalia Productions, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Simon, *Jupiter’s Travels*, 447.

Ernesto Che Guevara wrote maybe the most famous account of a motorcycle odyssey. His *The Motorcycle Diaries*<sup>10</sup> narrates the tale of circling Latin America with his friend, Alberto, on a 1939 500cc Norton named *La Poderosa*, “The Mighty One.” Che, a medical student at the time, becomes deeply affected by the journey, namely, with the poverty and the struggle of the poor and the sick, culminating with his time at a leper colony. Later in his life, he live into his famous Marxist revolutionary role as he became disillusioned with capitalism and fought against its unjust treatment and exploitation of South America.

But first, Che was an adventure motorcyclist. One with deep spiritual insights that led to his advocacy for justice. Regarding his journey and how it affected him, he reflects, “The person who wrote these notes passed away the moment his feet touched Argentine soil again. The person who recognizes and polishes them, me, is no longer, at least I am not the person I once was. All this wandering around ‘Our America with a capital A’ has changed me more than I thought.”<sup>11</sup> Obviously, Che experienced a dramatic transformation, a new perspective, much of it with spiritual implication, including his view of poverty, the worth of humanity, and justice issues. And like many adventure motorcyclist before and after him, he claims to travel was his destiny and that it changes his perception of the world, “I now know...that my destiny is to travel...Perhaps one day, tired of circling the world, I’ll return to Argentina and settle in

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<sup>10</sup>Ernesto Che Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey* (North Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Ocean Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey*, 32.

the Andean Lakes, if not indefinitely then at least for a pause while I shift from one understanding of the world to another.”<sup>12</sup>

Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*<sup>13</sup> offers a philosophical voice to the conversation. While the book deals with Pirsig’s struggle with mental illness, his relationship with his son, and personal transformation, a philosophical argument is interwoven throughout the narrative. Pirsig tries and largely succeeds at using the authentic art of motorcycling and motorcycle maintenance to reconcile the dichotomy between the classic and the modern, the artistic and the rational, the scientific and the spiritual. He says that its quality, its value that really matters. “Quality, value creates the subjects and objects of the world. The facts do not exist until value has created them. If your values are rigid, you can’t learn new facts.”<sup>14</sup> This is a great philosophical and spiritual insight that I apply to religious pilgrimages and faith later in this work.

And then there are those who ride to cope with crisis and process grief in the midst of loss. Neil Peart, best known for his legendary drumming prowess with the Canadian progressive rock band, Rush, lost his only child, his daughter in a car accident, and then lost his wife to cancer a year later. The only means to deal with this tragedy he could muster was to take his BMW GS on a sojourn searching for a reason to live. He called himself, Ghost Rider.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into*, 318.

<sup>15</sup> Peart, Neil, *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: ECW Press, 2002).

Adventure motorcyclists, of course, are not all men. Avis and Effie Hotchkiss, a mother-daughter duo from Brooklyn, rode a Harley-Davidson equipped with a sidecar across the continental USA in 1915. Dorothy “Dot” Robinson raced Enduro in the 1930s and 1940s and won the famous Jack Pine Enduro, an off-road race across the state of Michigan. Bessie Stringfield was the first African American woman to travel across the country solo. She did it at the age of 19 in the 1930s. The diversity of adventure motorcyclists is as expansive as the picturesque scenery and the multiple cultures adventure motorcyclists encounter.

I share aspirations and motivations with many of these riders that have come before me. Like Robert Fulton, Jr., I ride to deeply experience the world and to come into direct contact with people’s needs. Like Ted Simon, I ride to show myself and the world that I am great at something. Like Che Guevara, I ride to understand injustices, which in my context, relates to religious diversity and interfaith relationships. Like Robert Pirsig, I ride to wrestle with philosophical dichotomies and tensions that plague our world. And like Neil Peart, I ride to heal and become whole again.

For me, in addition to the motivations I share with other riders, the context of long-distance motorcycle riding is seen through the lens of religion, spirituality, and faith. It’s not just travel. It’s holy travel. It’s a religious pilgrimage.

Most importantly, each rider needed to be transformed by the road to claim their new identity. Each had elements of their selves before the trip, but the road changed them and molded them into new people, who could bring the road back with them into their lives. Fulton became an inventor. Simon became a god. Guevara became a militant activist. Pirsig reconciles his past. Peart heals and becomes a husband and father

again. And I, Rev. Raymond Jacob Hofmeister, become a minister that understands faith is the road.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **GROWING UP A MOTORCYCLE PILGRIM**

My first memories as a child were riding motorcycles, even before riding a bicycle. Two-wheels are the foundation of my identity. And it started with my parents. They have been avid motorcyclist throughout their lives, racing every form of competition and even winning an amateur national championship in sidecar scrambles in Salina, Kansas, with my mom as the monkey, leaning way out over the sidehack, with her head scraping the ground.

So naturally, when our local Presbyterian Church camp, Geneva Hills in Lancaster, Ohio, created a weeklong motorcycle trip as the final summer offering of the camp season, my parents did not hesitate to sign up the whole family. My parents probably thought, “Combining the adventure of motorcycle riding with instilling good religious values for my children? We are there! Who wouldn’t love that?”

Geneva Hills wasn’t merely a traditional summer camp, it was a unique community that espoused formative values. Geneva Hills promoted the challenges of adventure and embracing diverse community as its primary spiritual identities. The camping grounds boasted an extensive high ropes course with a zip line traversing a lake, Conestoga wagons for sleeping quarters, and cliffs and caves for rock climbing and spelunking—an adventurer’s playground. Next, Geneva Hills lies in close vicinity to central Ohio, which has a deep history of motorcycling and serves as the home of the



American Motorcyclist Association (the largest national motorcycle rights and sanctioning group). Further, the location of the camp borders the Midwest and Appalachian mountain cultures, the staff at the camp hailed from various cultural and religious (though mostly Christian) backgrounds, and while the camp was owned by the Presbyterian Church (USA), Geneva Hills expressed its own personality of diversity. It became its own unique community, bringing together people from various backgrounds around the ideals of adventure, community, and spirituality. And, of course, the executive director and his wife were adventure motorcyclists.

That sort of environment at Geneva Hills, one that gathers around shared interest rather than similar backgrounds or culture, resembles motorcycling culture. Motorcyclists commune around the shared love of riding which allows them to uniquely access adventure, freedom, and spirituality. While there does exist brand loyalty and certain groups gravitate towards homogeneity of riding styles, lifestyles, or dress, generally motorcycle culture welcomes everyone and celebrates the variety of individual personalities. Doctrine, dogma, ideologies, and labels are superficial. These shared traits made a group motorcycle pilgrimage a perfect fit with the Geneva Hills culture.

I was seven and my brother was three the first year. Mom threw me on the back of her Low Rider Harley, with a 21 inch, spoked front wheel and Dad threw my three-year-old brother in the side car of his 1965 500cc BMW boxer slash 2. My brother hesitated initially, but when my father lured him into the seat with a half dozen Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figurines, he turned into a most laidback motorcycle passenger, often falling asleep in the bottom of the car.

We made the 40 minute ride to Geneva Hills. As we turned into the gravel drive that began winding back into the wooded hills of Southern Ohio, we noticed several other bikes behind us. We pulled up to the lodge and saw about 12 bikes total. All different makes: BMWs, Hondas, Kawasakis, Triumphs, Harleys, and Suzukis. Some of the riders were pastors, some were lay people, some were beginners, some were experts, some were retired, all were Christian—though many of us different kinds.

Later on, during the trip, as we all stopped at a scenic view pull-off, a passerby came up to talk to us. As I mentioned before, brand homogeneity is the stereotyped truth of motorcycle culture. Harley riders ride together. BMW riders ride together. Honda riders ride together. So this stranger approached us, and he noticed that we were all together, but all riding different brands of motorcycles. He said, “You guys must be Christian...because that’s the only way that a Harley rider would be caught dead with BMW and a Honda rider!” We all laughed. And that’s the first time I realized, something deeper than brand loyalty brought us together. We were Christian. We cared about religion and spirituality. Sure, we rode for the fun, the camaraderie, and the adventure. But, there was an even deeper reason. We were on a religious pilgrimage.

I remember vividly that first night around a big table with a fire near by in the main lodge where everyone gathers for camp. The director and his wife oriented us for the week ahead: we planned to ride from Ohio to the Delaware Gap and back through Gettysburg. And along the way we were going to stop at a different church camp or religious community at night. They told us we participate in evening worship, lead prayers, and sing songs. And that the point of the trip was to deepen our relationship with God, with each other, with the communities we visit, and with nature. The

motorcycle was just the vehicle to achieve this more important end. So that began 6 or 7 years of religious pilgrimages on a motorcycle. And that began, at the age of seven, the formation of my spiritual essence—adventure (on a motorcycle).

Our misfit motorcycle gang dubbed ourselves ‘Hill’s Angels,’ a less-than-comical combination of Geneva Hills Church Camp and the legendary bay area Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang, made famous by Louisville native gonzo journalist, Hunter S. Thompson.<sup>16</sup> We rode from church camp to church camp, to religious community to retreat center. We stopped, visited, and shared meals with Mormons in Ohio, Mennonites in Kentucky, and Methodists in North Carolina. We stayed at camps run by Nazarenes in Illinois, Presbyterians in Michigan, and non-denominational Christians in Iowa. We even visited a Jewish camp in Pennsylvania and a secular community in Virginia. We saw the peaks of the Appalachian, the beaches of the Atlantic, the fury of Niagara Falls, and the towering dunes of Lake Michigan.

We met many different people, heard inspiring faith stories, and saw new parts of God’s creation. We built lasting relationships and became family. Looking back, I realize that my parents instilled in me, my particular style of faith. A family’s influence, especially parents’ influence, plays a major and fundamental role in the faith and spiritual development of an individual, possibly that most crucial of any factor. It’s the task of growing into spiritual maturity, taking this influence and challenging it, disagreeing with parts, and incorporating others into one’s soul, and then we are to make it our own. I learned to express my faith and experience the divine through adventuring on a motorcycle. It’s so central to my spiritual identity that it feels as if it has always been

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<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*.

present, and it will always remain. That's why I do my Christianity, my spirituality on a motorcycle--because it's in my bones. And from the legacy of my parents and my Geneva Hills family, this motorcycle pilgrimage is how I am making my faith my own.

### CHAPTER 3

#### A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF PILGRIMAGE

For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the tradition of holy travel begins with Abraham. Abraham and his clan, after migrating from Ur, what is now Iraq, to Haran, modern Turkey, embarked upon a new destination due to direct instructions from God. In Genesis 12:2-3, God promises Abraham and Sarah, his wife, a blessing if he follows God's command to migrate. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be bless."<sup>17</sup> Abraham and his family moved to the land of Canaan. Famine and hardship forced them to Egypt and when the famine subsided, they returned to Canaan and lived out their days as relatively wealthy nomads.

Abraham's story of holy travel is accounted in the New Testament book of Acts which connects the followers of Jesus to Abraham and Sarah's legacy. The apostle Paul sees Jesus Christ as a continuation and fulfillment of the blessing God promised Abraham.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> All biblical quotations are New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>18</sup> Dale T Irvin, *Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions*, eds. Elaine Padilla and Peter C. Phan, *Theology Migration, and the Homecoming* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

In Islam, the Qur'an refers to Abraham's travel as a foundation of faith and Surah 22, "Pilgrimage" institutes holy travel as a pillar of Islam. This pilgrimage, or *al-hajj*, consists of journeying to Kaaba in Mecca which is a sacred house that Abraham built with Ishmael, his son. Muslims all over the world are called to make pilgrimage to this site. Dale Irvin, President of New York Theological Seminary, writes, "Islam links Abraham's legacy with the Kaaba in Mecca most concretely and clearly with the universal aspects of the faith. Abraham's migration in Islam links deliverance with pilgrimage. The ongoing practice of *al-hajj* extends that to the ends of the earth."<sup>19</sup>

Another kind of travel or migration in the Abrahamic traditions was the exodus and the wandering in the wilderness led by Joshua. Many of the Israelite people never returned home after this migration, which led to the Jewish reality of the diaspora, or "scattering." The tradition of travel and migration continued for centuries as people of Jewish descent moved all over the world. In the twentieth century, many Jews would return to the newly designated state of Israel, which can be seen as the other side of the coin of the scattering of the diaspora. It was a gathering. Due to the steeped history in Jewish traditions, travel, migration, scattering, and gathering have been potent themes in the religious lives of Jews.

"Going forth and returning home, or scattering and gathering, have not only been powerful tropes for Jewish Life and thought over the centuries but for Christian theological discourse and tradition as well."<sup>20</sup> Jesus and the disciples were itinerant healers and preachers who told followers to "witness to the ends of the earth" and to go

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 12.

and teach “all nations” (Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:19 NRSV). Jesus wandered, crossing borders and boundaries in his ministry which is epitomized in Mark 8:20, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” The early followers would travel, spreading the gospel, and new communities emerged in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

In these early centuries of Christianity, diversity was affirmed by this border-crossing spreading of the good news. The apostle Paul, writing to these early diverse communities, “envisions all the various nations coming together to dwell in the new creation as children of God, but they are included in their variety as different peoples. In other words, Paul does not collapse Jew and Gentile into one generic mass of humanity. All will be kin; none will be strangers, but the Gentile will not become a Jew, and the Jew will not become a Gentile, ‘God created a multiplicity of nations, and a multiplicity of nations God will redeem.’”<sup>21</sup> Each group, each culture, each nation, even each religion had to remain unique and intact for the gathering of nations to truly manifest. Gentiles couldn’t convert and become Jews for the kingdom of God to arrive. Due to these profound theological reasons, Christianity, one of the first in human history, proposed a community of difference, *koinonia*, where diversity was maintained. Before this, empires never conceptualized different peoples under their reign being a community together and Aristotle argued that being friends with people of other classes was impossible. But Christianity challenged these notions and instilled the value of a diverse community. This value was personified by Jesus and the followers of the early church, but when Christianity became imperialized, this diversity was threatened.

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<sup>21</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not A Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009), 254-5.

In the fourth century, Christians experienced a sort of political “gathering” when power was centralized in the Roman Empire. Pilgrimages became formalized, replacing the wandering Jesus and the disciples exemplified, and were instituted with a designated destination in mind, most popularly, Jerusalem and the holy land of Israel.<sup>22</sup> Due to Christianity becoming a territorial religion with an organized hierarchy, the profound, almost pluralistic reality of Christianity became more homogenous.

It was the medieval pilgrims, the wanderers who kept the true diverse heart of Christianity intact by de-territorializing it. Peregrination, a spiritual wandering, was championed by the peregrine from Ireland. “Wherever they went they preached, established monasteries, and demonstrated signs and wonders associated with healing and salvation.”<sup>23</sup> Many of these medieval pilgrims “saw themselves as reliving the life of Christ. They often referred to their pilgrimage as an *Imitatio Christi*.”<sup>24</sup> And like Christ, they would wander, impacting a diverse group of people and embracing that value of difference at the heart of Christianity. Later, “the reorganization of monastic life in the ninth century, which is associated with the name of Benedict of Aniane, reinforced the hostility of the authorities to wandering monks.”<sup>25</sup>

While the religious institution seemed eager to suppress holy travel, pilgrims gathered together with people of a different kind, from different places. Difference remained at the heart of expression and identity. This sort of de-territorized, wandering

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<sup>22</sup> Irvin, *Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Sumption, *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God* (Mahwah, NJ: Hiddenspring, 2003), 128.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 135.



spirituality was not merely a Christian discipline but also a multifaith one. “By the seventh century CE, Christian monasteries were common along the Silk Road stretching across Central Asia. Christians made their way alongside Buddhist and Manicheans.”<sup>26</sup> Zoroastrians and Muslims would also join together with the pilgrims. This grounds pilgrimage in religious and spiritual diversity, promoting it as a central component to faith development.

Throughout my pilgrimage project, I reclaim the millennia-old spirituality of pilgrimage that promotes the creation of faith in a community of difference and religious diversity as central to the formation of identity. It is the ecumenical, interfaith aspects of pilgrimage that spur the creation of faith. It is the wandering, anti-institutionality of pilgrimage that makes it authentic and genuinely forms spiritual identity.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PILGRIMAGE I: EMBARKING UPON ADVENTURE**

Tomorrow I embark on a journey from Portland, Oregon to Anchorage, Alaska on a rental BMW 1200GS motorbike, bringing only what I can fit in the two side-panniers, Wolfman duffle and tank-bag. It's about 2500 miles if I were to travel directly to rental company's headquarters in Anchorage. But, how many times do you get to ride a motorcycle to Alaska? I'm definitely doing at least twice that many miles. After trips to the northern Alaska-Canada border crossing west of Dawson City, YT and up the Haul Road to the Arctic Circle, I'm sure I'll get close to 5,500 or 6,000 miles in two weeks.

I'm sitting in a Portland Holiday Inn right now, just arriving 30 minutes prior. I feel a restless anxiety regarding the trip ahead of me. It's a mixture of nervousness over the unknown and the sheer anticipation of the joyous freedom adventure brings. Sure, I'm worried about the dangers like weather and the risk of a motorcycle accident, but overcoming these fears gives the satisfaction of accomplishment only adventure can bestow.

Adventure is a very spiritual notion. It is how one must live. Through faith, one steps out into the unknown, overcoming fears in order to experience something new, worthwhile. Ultimately, adventure changes us. And we go on living our lives, giving others the gift adventure has given us. In many ways, adventure is the heart of spiritual

and religious experience. We, Christians, use Advent to describe the holy season of Jesus Christ's birth.

My first stop will be McMenamin's Microbrewery housed in a former Methodist church in Portland, then I will visit the only Shinto Shrine in the lower 48, the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America in Granite Falls, Washington.

The trip, already, is off to a very interfaith start. On the shuttle from the parking area to the terminal at Detroit Wayne County Airport, I got to know my driver, Moses.<sup>27</sup> Moses lives in Dearborn and is Muslim. Dearborn, Michigan boasts the highest concentration of Arab Muslims and the largest mosque in all of North America. Moses told me about the wonderful Halal food in his neighborhood, how much the Muslim community is growing and thriving, and his continued heartbreak concerning bigotry directed towards Muslims, post-9/11. I told him about my work with Muslims at Texas Christian University and at Borgess Medical Center in Kalamazoo. I asked him if he's seen *All American Muslim* on TLC. He quipped, "My kids watch that religiously!" He was also impressed and honored that I had read the entire Quran recently. He dropped me off at my gate, and with a big grin on his countenance, he exclaimed, "I'll see you again soon, Jake!"

For ten minutes, two people from different religious backgrounds, got to know each other a little bit.

The first riding day of my motorcycle pilgrimage began with a flurry of emotions. The night before I was so restless, I didn't drift to sleep until around 4 am. I was afraid, excited, impatient...much like the night before a big AP Physics test or before

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<sup>27</sup> Names throughout this narrative are changed or omitted for privacy concerns.

a visit to Cedar Point when I was younger. Because sleep had eluded me for so long, I awoke too tardy to make my appointment at McMenemy's Brewery to speak with the owner. It was already 930am. I was anxious to get moving. My head was throbbing. For a moment, I thought about skipping the brew-church and blasting up into Washington. In order to get well into British Columbia for the night, I had five or six hundred miles ahead of me, on a bike I'd never ridden.

I raced to the lobby to grab my Holiday-Inn-Express-famed warm cinnamon roll and jumped on the rented 2011 Bavarian Motor Werks 1200 cubic centimeters GS (Gelände/Straße meaning off-road/street). As I was mounting my trusty steed that the rental company had named Blanca due to its pearl white plastics, I noticed something disheartening. The rear tire showed substantial tread wear.

I arranged for the bike to be delivered to the hotel before my arrival to Portland late the night before, so I missed the opportunity for an in-person once-over with the representative. Rear motorcycle tire tread life usually lasts 4 to 7 thousand miles, and if they left a used tire on my rental, I may be forced to replace it before I finish my planned 6 thousand miles. The tire looked to have at least 2 or 3 thousand on it, and with Whitehorse the only city between BC and Anchorage where I could find a replacement, my adventure began with a big concern. But I rationalized it by telling myself, they wouldn't give me a tire which couldn't make it to Anchorage, so I turned the ignition key, pushed the starter, and felt the rumblings of the twin opposed boxers. In neutral, I twisted the throttle, to warm the engine. As I turned back the right handgrip, I felt the motorbike sway side to side. It startled me. I turned the throttled again, and again, I felt the motorcycle sway. It was already a hazy, rainy morning in Portland, cutting down

visibility which makes operating a bike more treacherous. Now, the bike was rocking back and forth when applying the throttle. I found out later from my Godfather and riding guru that a boxer engine has a gyroscopic mechanism which causes that swaying when at a stand still. But at speeds, the sway is negated to unnoticeable by the inertia of the forward moving bike.

This mechanism of the BMW mirrors my own personal state. I am scared of the journey. I'm afraid I will not find a fulfilling job, like I had at TCU, again. I'm worried about my future life as a married man, wondering if I choice the right woman and if it was the right timing. There is a worry that we may have rushed things. In order for me to move to Michigan and live in the small town church-owned manse, though it was technically legal in our church governance to live together unmarried, we were implicitly forced to get married lest we create a major distraction and distrust in the middle America small town.. So my life was wobbly, like the gyroscope. But all I needed to do was begin to move and increase my speed down the road. The gyroscope motion diminished, and I became steady and true.

I embarked upon my short journey down I-5 to McMenamin's Old Church and Pub. It was about 20 miles South, in the opposite direction of Alaska, which felt difficult and wrong. It tested my patience, but I wanted to begin my multifaith pilgrimage as planned. After a few minutes of low visibility rain and fog, the scenery opened up under a super bright, vivid sun that made the pines and wildflowers pop with clarity. Only right after rainy cloud cover can the sun emerge to make the earth look so real, almost ethereal. This vantage of Portland reminded me of an Appalachian mountain river town, with its industry centered around river trade, and the narrow river valley rising upwards

with scores of conifers. The Rose City felt crisp and friendly. I battled the Priuses and the Outbacks for a few miles, but the interstate opened up just out-of-town which gave me the first glimpse of the freedom that motorcycling promises. I was doing it. I was riding a motorcycle to Alaska. I was taking a multifaith pilgrimage. Pure joy. I exited I-5 and encountered a purist's nightmare, suburban sprawl, planned communities, Starbucks. I endured and pulled into the church-now-microbrewery's parking lot.

An hour late to my appointment, I approached the entrance but noticed the brewery dark and the door locked. Either the owner failed to show or had left. It was still an hour or so until McMenamin's opened for lunch, so I settled for walking around the grounds snapping photos and contemplating the deeper meaning beneath a church being resurrected as a microbrewery.

The idea for this motorcycle pilgrimage began at my tenure as Chaplain at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. My main responsibility consisted of supervising the interfaith community and creating programs to improve religious literacy on campus. One of the Muslim student leaders invited the creators of the 30 Mosques in 30 Days project to campus. During the month of Ramadan, they visited thirty different mosques in 30 different states. To a standing room only crowd in the student union, they told the story of American Islam through their pilgrimage, through their encounters, and through their conversations along the way. Their inspiration led to these experiences on the road.

I chose to visit this microbrewery in Portland to officially kick off my trip because I felt it represented the culture of the Pacific Northwest and the deep spiritual changes presently impacting Christianity in the USA.

I wandered the manicured grounds, peered through the windows which revealed large mixing vats, and asked myself, “What does it say about us that our church buildings are now in the craft beer business?” It seems to me that this could be a better reflection of a community of love than churches that are still churches. Jesus might choose to preach not at First Presbyterian across the street, but here, spreading the gospel over a 6 dollar India Pale Ale. The fact that I am thinking this way signifies the trend of a transitional state that will lead to a radical new form of spiritual community.

I do think craft breweries can teach Christianity a few lessons. I, myself, have enjoyed many deep conversations over a Crooked Tree IPA at Dark Horse. Everyone, no matter belief or religion, is welcome. Life is celebrated over organic entrees and tasty libations. It brings the community together. People support each other in crises. However, the craft beer scene may be equally elitist and segregated as many churches, drawing community members who are homogeneously white, bobo (bohemian/bourgeois), addicted to Instagramming plates of food, and sporting ironic mustaches.

As I sauntered to remount the saddle and head for Washington, I exclaimed, “I do feel more connected in a microbrewery!” And I should feel this connection in our churches, but I don’t. Sure, it may reflect my rebellious and contrarian tendencies and an appetite for hops, but the presence and connection of Christ is absent in our churches, in the PC(USA). The microbrewery celebrates the true humanity of the community (not separating sex, desire, art, and passion from spirituality), and lubricated by fermented libations, relationships are nurtured, deeply spiritual needs and aspirations are attended to, and all are welcome in a multicultural, diverse community.

I blasted North on I-5, and as I crossed the Willamette River, Mount Hood's perfectly volcanic conical figure rose skyward. I realized, at that moment, why everyone is moving to Portland. I motored over the iconic Columbia River, vowing someday to return to catch a sturgeon, like Jeremy Wade on *River Monsters*. I'd settle for a sockeye.

After about 100 miles of pines and peaks, I stopped for gas. Immediately, a 60 something man donning leather skin and a glorious white mustache approached me. He quipped, "I wish I was you, today! Where ya headed?" "I'm actually on my way to Alaska, just started from Portland." "That's a hell of a ride. The name's Bill," as he extended his hand to shake. He told me about his old riding days, when he raced Huskies and BSAs. "Now, I've got a damned Honda Goldwing. I regret that I sold out but that son of a bitch is comfy. And makes the Mrs. happy."

Normally, I'm an introvert and shy away from stranger conversations, but I caught myself not wanting this conversation to end. I even noticed Bill retreating to his truck as I refused to stop talking. Why the difference in my behavior, I wondered. And then it hit me, I am lonely already. But instead of stewing in my loneliness, it seems life on the road, life in motion, breaks the ice and gives me confidence. It is already changing me, and I am becoming an active, extrovert member of the Church on Two-Wheels. Motorcycling has created for me such a strong connection, such a powerful bond to others that it is truly my home, my spiritual home. It's a community that has transformed me. The PC(USA) and the church in general could learn a lot of this community, this diverse, hospitable collection of diverse individuals out on the road.



Seven months earlier in the Shenandoah Valley, my wife of two hours, I will call her “the Appalachian,” and all of our closest friends and family were cutting a rug to Home, by Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros.

Alabama, Arkansas,

I do love my Ma and Pa

Not the way that I do love you

Home, let me come home

Home is wherever I’m with you

Home, let me come home

Home is wherever I’m with you

Back on the bike and back on the adventure, I belted out the chorus over the constant whooshing of the wind and the growl of the engine. “I wish the Appalachian were here. Then I would never leave.”

I rode through downtown Seattle, which rustled up memories of coming of age and the only friendship I regret losing. Maybe, it can still be salvaged, I hoped. I should stop in Queen Anne to see if John is home. But I choice the coward’s path and kept riding. I guess the road still needs some time to change me into who I should be.

In Everett, I cut over to highway 9 and headed north to the Tsubaki Kanagara Shrine in Granite Falls. Here is the email correspondence with caretaker of the shrine:

Hi,

I will be visiting the shrine on Thursday May 10 probably in the afternoon. Will someone be there to show me around and maybe answer a few questions? I would like to take pictures and video, too, if that’s allowed. I am writing a book

about different religious communities around the USA and would like to include your shrine in my book.

Best,

Jake Hofmeister

Hello Mr. Hofmeister,

Thank you for your email. I am sorry to report that I must be in Japan between 5/7 and 5/12...I will be at the shrine on 5/13..is it possible for you to reschedule your Omairi/ visit?

yoroshiku/ best regards

America Tsubaki Okami Yashiro Kannushi

For the second time on my trip, I wasn't able to meet a member of the religious community, but I decided to visit anyway. I spent 30 minutes making wrong turns into public schools and subdivisions, but finally found the entrance. An impressive Torii, a large Japanese gate, welcomed my arrival. I rode down the long steep gravel drive flanked by dense, sentineled forest. I pulled up to the shrine and cut the engine. It was a most tranquil landscape, the definition of peace. There where azaleas and hastas and granite prayer paths. Signs of welcome and invitation abounded. The Pilchuck River rippled glacier-blue, Cascade mountain water.

I dismounted, grabbed a Peanut Toffee Buzz Clif bar and poured a cup of coffee out of my olive green Stanley canteen. After my quick nosh, I lit an American Spirit cigarette and sat on the banks of the river. Two drags in, I threw the cigarette and the entire pack in the river. I vowed never to pass lonely time with a cigarette again, as I had

occasionally in the past. I felt ashamed over soiling God's pristine creation, but felt that the power of the ritual warranted it.

I, then, walked the grounds, marveled at the beauty. Origami cranes brought up memories of learning about World War 2 in elementary school. I partook in ritual washing of my hands and mouth and proceeded to ring the bell to enter the shrine. It was locked, though disappointing, I felt something move in my soul. Maybe it was a connection to others that had been here or to a religion that originated thousands of miles away. Visiting that shrine changed me a little bit, but at the time, I wasn't sure how. I hopped back on the bike to figure it out.

In the scholarly compilation *Muslim Travelers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination* contributor Abderrahmane El Moudden suggests that travel integrates community through awareness of the wider community and gives the sojourner a sense of local consciousness through the newborn ability to contrast. Through the 3 stages of travel, embarking on the unfamiliar, the testing of adventure, and the reintegrating into one's home society, the traveler's identity and selfhood are challenged as cultural filters are deconstructed and new insights gained. As S. Naipaul puts it, "All travel is a form of gradual self-extinction."<sup>28</sup> As a Muslim embarking on Hajj, I yearned for religious learning, meaning, spiritual insight, and personal transformation. Who was I becoming and who was I leaving behind?

My afternoon cruise at the base of the Cascades provided a glimpse of the grandeur of the landscape ahead. I arrived at the border crossing at Sumas in the early evening. I supplied my passport to the attendant and motored into the foreign country

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<sup>28</sup> Dale E. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migrations, and the Religious Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

dubbed the Great White North. I rode the Trans-Canada Highway 1 to Hope, BC. Exhausted, I called it a riding day as only an hour of daylight remained.

Hope, nestled on the Fraser River and surrounded by craggy peaks, is the gateway to the Cassiar Highway, the only alternative route besides popular Al-Can. I pulled into a cheap motel in the heart of town. I was greeted by a friendly neighbor sitting outside the room next to mine. Terry was smoking a cigarette and listening to the Blue Jays game. I removed my helmet and put on my 59/50 Reds cap. He noticed and must have figured I'd love to hear a 30-minute narrative about his trip to Riverfront Stadium during the Big Red Machine days. "Pete Rose needs to be re-instated. Bud Selig has to let him into Cooperstown," he passionately pleaded. I listened, partly interested, partly yearning to fill my starving stomach with Hope's finest cuisine.

Almost everything was closed, so I pulled into a Subway. I'm still disappointed that my first dinner on this epic journey consisted of processed lunch-meat at a multinational conglomerate. After a mildly tasty Canadian/Italian sandwich, I walked to the liquor store to grab some beer. My beer pretension revealed itself, as they only carried Budweiser equivalent Canadian mass-brews. I grabbed a six-pack and walked to the park overlooking the river. I cracked a slightly cooled, fizzy yellow beer and reflected on the day. The adventure really begins on the Cassiar, I thought to myself. Then I remembered a road-trip to Alaska up the Cassiar I took with my parents and my brother. I wish they were here, too. Then, I'd definitely never leave.

In 2008, my parents, my brother, and I took the trip of a life time—to the Last Frontier. I was 25 and my brother, 21. At the time of the trip, we were both going through difficult transitions in life. We were trying to become men, differentiate

ourselves from and our parents, find meaning in life, and somewhat naively with a bit of narcissism, we were trying to become someone important. The trek commenced with my brother, having partied all night with the Twang (his trusty group of 8 friends), still inebriated. I took the wheel and headed west.

Having graduated from Louisville Seminary and looking for work, I had been hired by our great friends and Geneva Hill's Angels motorcycle pilgrimage creators to work a month as a counselor at Ross Point Camp and Conference Center in Post Falls, ID. The motorcycle pilgrimages that my family took with them when I was young planted the seed that flourished into this project. My brother was to drop me off in Idaho and head to the Monastery of St John of San Francisco in Lassen, CA. His devoted and eventually troubled relationship with Orthodox Christianity was at its most intense at the time. My parents were going to fly out to California, meet up with my brother, and pick me up in Idaho, and then head north.

My brother and I encountered a Midwest monsoon causing an I-70 closure in Indiana. We took back roads down through Bloomington, into Kentucky and Tennessee, and on into Little Rock for the night. Little did we know at the time, how this adventure would profoundly influence the trajectory of our lives. It would serve as a cornerstone for the beginnings of our adult lives and more importantly set the tone for our spiritual personalities for years to come. In response to this trip, I would utilize adventure, pilgrimage, and holy travel as a central theme for my vocational development as an ordained minister and chaplain in the Presbyterian Church (USA). This trip for my brother further propelled him into a tragic relationship with the Orthodox Church of America. At the monastery, he was baptized for a second time, renamed, then attended

seminary in New York. At the end of his first semester, he suffered a falling out with the seminary community and left abruptly. He attended an OCA church in Louisville when he came to live with me, but moved back to Columbus and left the church just as abruptly as he left seminary. He also lost his best friend from college to a seemingly destructive monastic vocation in the same orthodox denomination which is well-known for its extreme fundamentalist converts, for which he feels responsible. My brother, to this day, fails to muster the energy to engage in conversation about the events that transpired, his relationship with organized religion totally cut off. Our drastically different religious experiences, following this meaningful family pilgrimage, creates a deep, anxiety-ridden confusion and ambivalence towards religion, a powerful tension with which I wrestle every day.

I settled into my Hope hotel bed for the night. I could hear rumblings in Terry's room next door. The Blue Jays must have won. I drifted to sleep wishing I didn't have to wait until the morning to get back on the bike.

The next morning, I arose to some dense fog, so I decided to walk downtown to grab a cup of coffee and a blueberry muffin. Across from memorial park, I stopped into the Blue Moose Coffee House: a funky hispter-esque joint, with a plethora of MacBook pros and Moleskine notebooks. I took my java and handheld cake across the street and reclined on a wooden bench in the midst of the square-shaped public green space. Someone's loved one's name was inscribed across the back rest. I wonder who this person was. I hope they did something great with their life, I thought. I hope I do.

Halfway through my coffee, I began to grow impatient. Some nasty storms were supposed to blow across the Yukon in a couple days, with snow and sleet and high

winds. I needed to do six or seven hundred miles to get through before it hit. There is nothing worse than hitting snow on two wheels. After all, it was only early May. Most likely, I was the first motorcycle of the year riding to Alaska. Motorcycle adventures, due to one's exposure to the elements, may be the purest form of the road trip. I didn't have a metal frame and a roof with climate control to keep me comfortable and safe. I could feel the chill of the arctic jet stream, I could smell the fragrance of spring rhododendron. On a bike, I was connected to nature in a much more profound, even spiritual way. And if it snowed, I'd be connected to that as well. Good thing I had heated hand-grips on this impressive feat of German engineering.

I departed from Hope, energized and ready to tackle the Fraser River Gorge. The sun beamed down into the canyon, creating a contrast between the glittering granite and the dark lava flows. Thirty five miles into this twisting roller coaster of a road, a feast for the senses, I passed Hell's Gate Airtram where my family had stopped to cross the bridge and eat fudge four years prior. We learned that fudge doesn't have to be made with chocolate, as I previously believed, and took one my favorite pictures of my parents standing on the bridge spanning the river. Beautiful day and beautiful memories.

Today was beautiful, too, I debated stopping to reminisce but kept riding. North of Williams Lake and on into Prince George, the traffic got heavy. Countless oil and natural gas workers and their company trucks clogged the route and my peace of mind. Getting angry and restless, I pleaded with traffic gods to clear the way, but alas, slow going was the new normal. After all, I'm not the only person in the world. I stopped in Prince George, a bustling fossil fuel driven sprawl, for a sandwich and gas. I got back on the road and headed up highway 16 toward Smithers.

The landscape was beginning to open up and so was the road. The snow-capped Canadian Rockies rose majestically from the valleys of tundra and lakes. Out of the traffic now, I could cruise at a cool 80 mph, and cool it was as the temperature began dipping into the 40s. 500 some miles into my ride that day, I began to look for lodging. Nothing in Vanderhoof or Houston. I kept on and began to ready myself for some road-side camping, which I was prepared to do, if necessary. As the sun was setting and at 600 miles for the day, I entered the mountain ski town of Smithers. A billboard advertised 60 dollar rooms at the Florence Inn. Done and done. I pulled into the motel and walked up to the front desk, shivering and in a post-long-haul-riding-day trance. The pink-haired, chubby manager said that rate applied to the off-season, but she'd make an exception since I spotted the advertisement. I thanked her, changed clothes in my room, and walked next door to grab a beer. I entered the Aspen Riverhorse Restaurant and sat at the bar beside two 20-something women. I ordered an IPA from the tongue-in-cheek named local brewery, Plan B. The women struck up a conversation, and they told me Liam Neeson's survival thriller *The Grey* was filmed here. I hadn't seen it at the time, but glad those human-eating wolves weren't around that day. I crossed my fingers, hoping for a smooth running machine over the duration of the pilgrimage.

The next morning, as I was loading my gear onto the bike, which really is a complicated process, I noticed an older couple packing a Harley-Davidson Touring Heritage Softail. Dick and Linda walked over to say hello, as fellow motorcyclist do, if anything to check out the other's ride. Dick handed me a business card that read, Riding for Jesus, and on the back had a map of the USA with John 3:16 lining the bottom. Dick and Linda returned last night from riding in their fiftieth state. They took the glacier



highway cutoff over through Stewart and into Hyder, Alaska, which is the farthest South one can cross into Alaska by road. Although, the road stops at Hyder, so to see the rest of Alaska, hundreds of miles on the Cassiar and the Al-Can are required.

I marveled at Dick and Linda's riding accomplishment, although cringed a little at the motivation to proselytize people along the way in their narrow and destructive manner. I mentioned I was a minister and I was on a religious pilgrimage. I told him I had just visited a Shinto Shrine in Washington. Dick shot me a concerned countenance that I can imagine marked his disapproval of my interfaith seeker misguidedness. I felt a bond to them through the Church on Two Wheels, however, simultaneously feeling slight repugnance.

As an ordained Presbyterian minister, the people that cause the most discomfort in my soul are fellow Christians. Admittedly, there is much anger and resentment to my brothers disastrous situation with narrow, fundamentalists, and I feel much guilt for the times in my life that fundamentalism has caught my attention and I've done some sexist, racist, and religiously intolerant things in the name of Christ, but Christian fundamentalists, those who are not open to any other way, are the opposite of my faith. Their spirituality causes them to stay put, shielding their eyes from new ways of seeing, valuing homogeneity and one-mindedness. My spirituality moves, grows, changes, and values complexity, openmindedness, and ambiguity. Their gospel is getting someone to convert into an exact replica of themselves. My gospel is joyfully moving across the world, interacting fully with humanity and creation.

I wave goodbye to my new friends, and commence my work of the day. It's 42 degrees Fahrenheit. My left foot upshifts to 6th gear. 80 miles per hour. No

traffic. This is what I've been waiting for, I thought. I turn my hand-grip warmers on high. I lifted my visor to feel the crisp, cool mountain air kissing my face. Too cold, but worth it. What adventures await me today?

I dominate the Cassiar Highway. I wind up and down the mountains. Roll over frost heaves and gravel sections without thinking, thanks to the sport suspension setting on my motorbike. Wildlife abounds. Deer, caribou, and bear. Tons of bears. They must be coming out of hibernation to eat the grass on the side of the road.

I stop after seeing one. I get the video camera out and record its lethargic, playful ambulation across the tarmac. It's a black bear, so I feel comfortable filming 50 yards away. No danger with this guy, he walks like he's drunk. The bear leisurely stands on top of the lane lines, looks around, chills out, and eats grass on the other side. I like him. He loves life. Do I? There was such a contrast between his laissez-faire attitude and my anxious traveling intensity. Maybe I should slow down enough to enjoy my surroundings and my time that is such a gift.

Traveling demands a balance of moving from one place to another, meeting deadlines (whether self-imposed or not), and embracing the peace of moving, of change. The possibility of danger always exists with travel, the possibility of difficulties and set-backs. The trick is to deal with the anxiety and fear that danger creates, accept it, and channel those feelings into the pure enjoyment of the moment. Once one accepts change as the norm, relaxation and peacefulness in the midst of the change is attainable. Allow the great professor that is change to teach the lesson of being human.

I bid farewell to my friend, the bear, and remounted. One hundred ninety miles into the day's ride, only seeing a few other vehicles on the road, the engine sputters and

cuts out. On the fly, I pulled in the clutch and pressed the ignition button to the left of the right grip. The engine fired briefly and quit. I slowly rolled to a stop on the berm. I just ran out of gas in the middle of British Columbia with no one around for miles.

But I meant to run out of gas. I wanted to gauge fuel range, and it turned out to be about 190 miles, fully loaded. I dismounted, un-bungied my 1.5 gallon emergency can of gas, and filled the tank. Hopefully, I will find a gas station in the next 50 miles, I thought, if not then I'd really be stranded in the middle of BC.

Finally, I arrived at the Bell 2 lodge, probably only 10 miles to spare. I pulled in and paid almost 7 dollars a gallon. While filling the tank, I saw a helicopter land behind the lodge. I headed into the lobby to pay and grab a Gatorade and a cup of soup. I asked the attendant, Jane, about the helicopter. She said the area is one of the best heli-skiing destinations in the world, and they were returning two Norwegian snowboarders from their runs. I responded, "I think I'll stick to motorcycle riding. That sounds safer." She laughed.

Back on the Cassiar, I found myself entering one of those heightened states, when time ceases to exist, senses are sharpened, when a person is really doing what they are supposed to be doing on this earth. Some artists call it flow, and my brush I used to paint my masterpiece on the canvas was my BMW 1200GS on the chip and tar surface of the Cassiar. Or maybe I was just having fun.

In what could've been 5 minutes or 10 hours, I arrived at the end of the Cassiar, where it dead-ends into the Al-Can. The Yukon: Larger than Life, or so the territory motto reads. I stopped at the Beaver Post Restaurant for a bowl of spaghetti and had an in depth conversation with a man and his daughter about my trip and the performance

specs of the BMW. I left, without getting petrol because it was a confusing, automated payment pumping system that I was too impatient to decode. I set out on the Al-Can with aspirations to make it to Whitehorse.

On the Al-Can, I ran into more traffic, but still sparse. About 50 miles into the ride, my gas gauge teetered on empty and a deep tiredness grasped my body. At 60 mph, I saw a building to the left, what looked like a lodge, but I didn't notice a gas pump. I turned around at an overlook, deciding to take my chances. It was Rancheria, YT. A lodge, a restaurant, and gas pumps. This was my bed for the night. I filled up, got a 60 dollar room that overlooked a majestic frozen-but-thawing lake, and with a few honey brown lagers, I settled in for the night.

I walked out on my room's deck that overlooked the lake and let the wildlife abundance wash over me. I made a video journal entry out on the deck and talked about the bears and the cold. The temperature got as low as 42 degrees during the ride. And I talked about missing Emily, my family, and friends. The road is exciting and lonely, and I had many, many more ways to go, to paraphrase Kerouac.<sup>29</sup> I felt like a modern cowboy riding my trusty, high-tech iron pony. At least, I would soon see my good friend from college, in Fairbanks and my Uncle Frank in Anchorage.

I awoke at 6am, endured the arduous, satisfying morning routine of strapping down my Wolfman waterproof bag full of gear and supplies, and headed to the restaurant for breakfast. It was closed, so I had to wait until 7. I didn't mind too much because it was 32 degrees, not the best riding weather after all. At 7, an imposing, grizzly bearded Canuck, fitting the lumberjack stereotype of my dreams, served me hotcakes with fresh

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<sup>29</sup>Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1991).

maple syrup and a western scramble. Pure Canadian maple syrup, no hyperbole, may just be enough to make this trip a success. I exchanged travel stories with an elderly couple from Utah traveling by recreational vehicle. Most of their friends were still down in the deserts of Arizona, but Hal and Betty chose to be early birds this year. And thank goodness their friends failed to join them. A month later RV's on the Al-Can would rival the state bird of Alaska, the Mosquito, in sheer numbers. But in mid-May, it was free and clear sailing.

The surface of the Al-Can was graded, smooth, and in pristine condition compared to its friend, the Cassiar. While the scenery was immense, long straight sections of smooth road coupled with the sheer scale of the Yukon rustled up hints of boredom in my adventurous demeanor. "I'm sure the adventure will find me," I chuckled.

And then, the first obstacle of adventure found me. It was cold but at least it was sunny, then after meandering around a large rocky peak and into a claustrophobic valley, the sky blackened and enormous white flakes of Yukon's choice precipitation covered the road and my visor. There are first times for every adventurer, and this was the first time I'd ridden a road bike in snow. My muscles anxiously tensed. I slowed the motorcycle to 40. My mind began racing, catastrophizing the conditions that would lead to my cold, snowy demise. Good thing I was rocking out to My Morning Jacket on my Klipsch noise-canceling earbuds. Jim James gave me comfort and confidence as I belted out his masterpiece, Gideon. "Religion should appeal to the hearts of the young. Who are you and what have you become?" And then, almost white-out conditions. I slowed to a

crawl, wiping my visor with my left glove, repeatedly. Twenty miles of mental and physical struggle with the elements.

As Jim James says, “religion should appeal to the hearts of the young. Who are you and what have you become?” The institution, the church has lost the presence of Christ, especially for the younger community. There are many, many reasons for this, like massive cultural shifts, technology, generational theory, and systemic issues, but one thing I know for sure, the presence of Christ is on the road.

And then a familiar site. The bridge at Teslin. I pulled over at the banks of Teslin Lake, under the bridge spanning the frozen waters. Memories flooded my head and heart. My family stopped here on the other side of town at Mukluk Annie’s Salmon Bake. My brother and I stayed in a 30 dollar cabin, outfitted with the commode in the middle of the bedroom, adjacent without any privacy to the bed and couch. My brother took full advantage of this once in a lifetime opportunity.

After some canteen coffee, I rode through Teslin and to my dismay, Mukluk Annie’s was boarded up, closed. What a tragedy, I muttered. I continued on, with the blue skies and sunshine warming the temperature to a manageable 45 degrees. I rode on, reminiscing, with Jim James belting out hipster rock ballads. My ears were happy. And so was I, I hoped.

I pulled into a gas station on the outskirts of Whitehorse, the capital of the YT, at 11am. I inspected the tread wear on the rear tire. The center strip of the tire tread had worn off almost completely. I debated stopping in Whitehorse to replace it. Anchorage lies about 700 miles away, with no tire options in between. Plus, I had planned on taking

an alternate route, the Klondike Highway to Dawson City, and crossing over into Alaska on the Top of the World, the remote secondary border crossing into the Last Frontier.

But my fear of time-wasting and stagnancy reigned supreme, since it was so early in the day, I should high-tail it to Anchorage and have the rental company replace it for free, I rationalized. I could make it to Tok by nightfall and stay at the Thompson's Eagle's Claw Motorcycle-only campground! Adventure is a harsh professor, I soon would find.

Through Whitehorse and into one of the most open and gigantic vistas imaginable, I rode with conviction. The frost heaves, which are created by ice freezing just beneath the road surface and pushing upward, grew to over 6 feet. Their regular frequency created a roller coaster-like sensation which mesmerized my attention and beckoned me to twist back on the throttle evermore. I was doing 95mph on a bald back tire over NBA center-sized frost heaves. Then, a canary yellow H-2 hummer roared past at 120. I admired the full recoil and release of the suspension and wagered with my imaginary bookey that the gas mileage was 3 mpg or less.

Without notice, my front end gave out, and I entered into a high-speed wobble. A chill of danger ran through my body. Instinctively, my right hand and foot applied gentle pressure to the front and rear disc brakes which slightly corrected the dangerous movement. I slowed to 40, still wobbling. I stood up on the foot pegs and peered over the handlebars to look at the front end of the machine. The front tire was fully inflated. Then, I knew. I spotted a dirt lane pull-off. I slowed the machine safely to a halt. Regret and anger coursing through my arteries. But it was a picturesque, clear sun Yukon afternoon. And I was an adventurer. Time to act like one.

I started recording my rant on camera, but found myself in a confident, convivial mood. In preparations for my pilgrimage, I took the possibility of a blown tire seriously. Alaska bound, my Godfather, blew a rear tire in the Yukon. Probably in a similar frost-heave laden stretch of highway. I removed the provided tire repair kit and my back-up kit purchased for a moment like this. I inspected the tire and found not one, but five failures of the rubber compound. It wasn't a puncture, it was a massive blow out.

Times like these, when the movement of the pilgrimage has stopped, reflection commences and layers of meaning and spiritual awareness are created. I should be worried and scared that I won't be able to fix the tire and I'll be stranded or that I will try to fix it and it will cause me to have an accident when I resume riding. But I am not. I am at peace, I am patient, and I am confident. I guess I'm feeling joy. I've changed.

I patched the tire in all five places and used all 3 CO2 cartridges to replace the lost air pressure. The pressure was still very low, probably only 5 psi, but it could run, but not for long. Now my conundrum: Do I head back to Whitehorse, 80 miles east, or do I chance continuing on to Haines Junction? Maybe they have a tire. With the condition of the rear tire, I probably only have a 20 mile range, if lucky, I thought. I'll need a tire and the only option is Whitehorse. However, since I passed no gas stations or campgrounds for 50 miles or so, I decided my best option was to continue west away from Whitehorse in hopes to find a phone to call a tow.

For ten miles, I carefully and fearfully crept along at 45 mph. Thankfully, I was in the Yukon and the traffic was almost non-existent. Though several times, a SUV flew around me like I was peddling the other kind of bike. And then, my salvation: a gas station, campground, restaurant combo lied ahead. Thank you Otter Falls Cutoff. I



wobbled into the parking lot due to my lost tire pressure, it was almost completely flat again.

I entered the convenient store and asked the attendant, Randy, for the phone to call a tow. He cautioned that a tow back to Whitehorse would be 6 or 7 hundred dollars. His input caused me to question my strategy. I could just re-patch it and refill it, I thought. Wally, a local Yukon contractor repairing the facade of the building, offered his construction grade air compressor for my use. I entered the temporary trailer which housed his equipment. Baffled by the plethora of equipment, I needed more guidance. He grabbed the compressor for me, I attached the cord to a power source, and commenced filling my rear tire. As the air entered the rubber compound, an equal amount of air exited through the patched areas. Shit. I need a tow. I told Wally that my tire was beyond repair, and he offered his brand new Ford F-150 to haul my bike back to Whitehorse. He said, "I have tons of repair work here. Just take it and bring it back tomorrow. I'm used to it. The Yukon is unforgiving. Everyone helps each other out because they know there will be a time when they need help, too. It's a harsh climate, but beautiful...and a damned good people, Yukoners, they are."

I was touched, but couldn't accept his offer, pride or some other neurosis prevented me to oblige. I grabbed my AAA card out of my wallet and dialed the number. They transferred me immediately to the equivalent motorist association in BC. The operator dispatched a tow truck from Whitehorse, ETA 2-3 hours. And at no cost to me, covered by my membership. My American-based membership at 100 and some dollars a year totally covered a 700 dollar, 80 mile tow in the Yukon.

But I missed an opportunity. Wally was there, to help me, to invite me to be part of this amazing community on the road where Christ's presence abounds, but I said no. I said no to the good Samaritan. I rejected God's grace.

Wally broke for lunch and I joined him. We ordered up a couple of Yukon's finest elk burgers and fries from Sarah, possibly Wally's former love interest. Or maybe current love interest, I couldn't tell. Wally went on about the amazingness that was Whitehorse. The mountains, the remoteness, the ice fog...nothing could match it. And the people, the community. I would agree if they were anything like Wally. I rambled about my adventure. Wally used to ride as well, but sold his bike to pay the bills. "With only a 3 or 4 month riding season, I figured I should spend my money elsewhere." I empathized.

Finished with lunch, Wally got back to work. He climbed the ladder to roof level to continue his repairs. Suddenly, like in a dream as I was gazing out the window, I saw the ladder fall to the side. Wally fell 20 feet straight into the ground. Self-conscious and embarrassed for him, I froze. I was worried about his safety, but thanks to my Midwestern, super-nice, non-confrontational demeanor, I wanted to avoid him knowing that I saw him fall.

Thankfully, he got up. Dusted himself off, picked up the ladder, and re-climbed. Damn, Yukoners are bad ass.

George, with Capital Towing, arrived less than two hours after I made the call to AAA. George hopped out of the cab, attached the bike to the flatbed, and lit his first of ten Marlboro Reds he smoked during our 80 mile trip back to Whitehorse.

George was a strange man. He stared through me with confusing, sad eyes simultaneously expressing gregariousness and aloofness in his countenance. He rambled a narrative about his fiancée, Pilar Gonzalez, whom he met during his annual snowbird trip to Puerto Vallarta. Since that first night at the Palapa, Pilar has attempted to secure a visa to move to Whitehorse. But George wasn't upset, he said he's got the best of both worlds—eleven months of freedom and one month of sex.

Travelling challenges one's preconceived norms, and this relationship, while weird and unorthodox and seemingly impossible to me, proved fitting and right for George.

George and I dropped off the bike at Yukon Honda and then he took me to Pioneer Inn. I immediately phoned the rental company and performed my emotional, disgruntled customer spiel. It's much easier to express dissatisfaction on a voicemail.

Then I headed to the hotel restaurant for sirloin and an Ice Fog IPA. The namesake phenomenon of Yukon Brewing's hoppy ale, occurs when the humidity is near 100 percent and the temperature drops well below freezing. Ice crystals form on the air and attach themselves to everything exposed. Ice fog, or pogonip, is just one of the many lovely advantages to living in the YT, the bartender explained. "And the tax incentives aren't too shabby either," he quipped. Canada, to entice residents to move to the three territories, provide substantial tax incentives, for the bartender, he said it worked out to about 7 grand.

I rose early and hiked a mile to the motorcycle shop. Top notch service. They replaced my worn tire with a new Metzeler by 930am. Three hundred dollars later, yes it is that expensive in the Yukon, I took on the frost heaves of the Al-Can once again. I was

forced to continue on the Al-Can, rather than traveling north via the Klondike to Dawson City. The Yukon River ferry, the only means of crossing from Dawson City to the Top of the World Highway to access the Alaska border crossing, was still shut down due to remaining ice on the mighty river.

I waved and beeped the horn as I passed Otter Falls. From the roof, Wally returned the gesture with a friendly salute. I gassed up at Haines Junction, preparing myself for the majesty of the Wrangell St. Elias range. As the monstrosities revealed themselves, I thought, “These really are the fields of Elysian and rivers of Okeanos.”

I remembered when I looked over this same valley, juxtaposed to the Wrangell St. Elias mountain range, listening to Jet, loving life with my bro driving, Dad a little sick, and Mom in a quirky Far-Side-comic mood. The vista demands my attention. I’ve seen it before. It’s God’s perfect scene. Towering, jagged peaks kissing the clear blue sky, while the olive, lime, and forest hues bow down before the rocky juggernauts, sharing aesthetic harmonies with their minor blue neighbors of mirrored glass. It conjured a familiar feeling in my heart of lover and beloved embracing. Heaven is this scene that I knew before ever seeing it with my eyes. I see it with my heart.

I basked in the greatness of the scenery and felt alive, but a sad loneliness crept up from the superficiality. My friends, bears and caribou came out to play, to remind me that I really wasn’t alone. I briefly retired to a rest area for coffee, overlooking Kluane Lake. A pleasant couple from Anchorage pulled up in a conversion van. I asked them the mileage to Paxson on the edge of the Denali Highway. They’d never heard of the town, which I should’ve read as a cautionary indicator that Paxson wasn’t really a town, at all.

Later, I rolled up to the border crossing into Alaska with my GoPro camera running. The border official stepped out of his glass booth, “I’m assuming your camera’s off?” It wasn’t, and I’d hoped he wouldn’t notice. Caught red-handed, I down-played my guiltiness by reaching for the off button, “Uhhh, Let me make sure.” I’m sure the bright flashing red light didn’t blow my cover, at all.

I supplied my documentation, fired the ignition, stepped down into first, engaged the clutch, and rolled on the throttle. I achieved a dream. I rode a motorcycle solo to Alaska. 20 miles later, I stopped to log my achievement via video diary. I laughed about my border crossing shenanigans.

After seeing 3 cars in 100 miles of Alaska Highway, I pulled into a Tok staple: Fast Eddies for an early dinner. My family stopped here before, so I gave them a call from a dinning room both. My dad cautioned me that the Denali Highway may still be closed, but I disregarded his advice like sons so often do. I should’ve listened.

I blasted down the Tok Cutoff, encountering the worst road conditions to date. This area of Alaska is extremely swampy, leading to rapid road deterioration. Every 10 miles, a gravel section, which I enjoyed on my off-road equipped adventure motorcycle. I just wish I was on my KTM 990 with the 21 inch front wheel, I thought. The BMW sported an inadequate 19 inch front.

I turned northwards towards Paxson on the Richardson highway. Realizing I was low on petrol, I hoped I could fill up before the Denali Highway. For adventure motorcycle riders, the Denali Highway lies towards the top on the bucket list. The original entrance to Denali National Park, the Denali boasts 135 miles of softball-sized

stones intermixed with mud and dirt, sweeping curves, elevation changes, and romantic vistas. And no traffic.

I zoomed past Meiers Lake Roadhouse which looked closed. Riding along Paxson Lake on a curvy, mood-changing section of road, I pulled into the run-down, funky, character-filled Paxson Lodge. I inquired to the owner, Chet, about the status of the antique gas pumps. He answered that the closest gas was Delta Junction or back the way I came at Meiers Lake. With a fill-up a necessity and the late night sunset quickly approaching, I anxiously sped to Meiers Lake Roadhouse. I dropped the kickstand, and knocked on the locked door. A wrinkled, hunched man sucking on a Virginia Slim answered the door. "Can I get some gas?" I asked. "Sure, let me fetch the keys." He returned 5 minutes later with a set of keys required to activate the pump. The tank took 4.9 gallons, almost capacity, and I followed the man into the bar area. While waiting on my credit card transaction, I learned that this chain-smoking couple, owners of the roadhouse, were originally from Michigan which at the time, was my home. Throughout my time in Alaska, I met more expats from Michigan than any other state.

Since Meiers Lake didn't have vacancies, I rushed back to Paxson Lodge. I booked a room, settled in, and walked down to the bar. I walked into a family affair. Everyone imbibing at the bar were related to the owners. Sons, daughters, in-laws, and cousins. Hunting, infidelity, and the Arctic Man, an extreme race and festival where souped-up snow machines tow skiers, were the topics of conversation. Over an Alaskan IPA, I learned that Arctic Man becomes the third or fourth largest town in Alaska where attendees use extreme winter sport fandom as a guise for drunken

debauchery. 200 HP snow machines towing skiers over a mountain at 100 mph, while onlookers binge on cheap whiskey and craft beer, what's not to love?

I mentally prepared for the ride ahead over a couple more Alaskans, witnessing a rapid alcohol induced decline in civility among the patrons. I retreated to my room before the atmosphere spiraled too far downward. I uploaded my pictures and video, charged my GoPro, and hit the sack. I noticed a sign before pulling into the lodge that the Denali Highway was still closed due to snow. I prayed a prayer of invocation and drifted off into an adventurer's slumber.

Chet, rotund, worn, with warm eyes, nonchalantly fixed my breakfast as he drank coffee and lounged with his family. I paid cash, they didn't take plastic, and I headed for the door. "You're lucky", Chet yelled over the sizzle of bacon grease. "The Denali just opened this morning. You'll be the first motorcycle on it for the season, maybe the first anything, well except for snow machines of course."

"That was a weird place," I said under my breath as I walked to my trusty steed. The people were adequately hospitable, but a strange aura permeated that lodge which contrived an uneasiness I couldn't explain. Maybe, my prejudice and xenophobia projected the anxiety onto this group of quirky, clannish rural Alaskans. I wondered if it had been different with a travel companion. It seemed the fear of aloneness and the unknown were cutting me off from deeply connecting with others. I saw them as exotic, as "the other," which was on the top of the list of Do-Nots for the traveler. "I have to keep that in check," I vowed.

The Denali Highway: 135 miles of adventure motorcycling bliss. The second highest road in Alaska, peaking out at over 4,000 feet at Maclaren Summit, 2500 feet

above the tree line. I stood up on the pegs, rolled back on the throttle, and lifted the front end for a wheelie--my way of saying yes to adventure.

I passed a sign that read Denali Highway closed for the season. I hoped Chet was right. The first 20 miles boasted winding tarmac, and then dirt, over 100 miles of gravel, mud, and rocks. Life was still frozen on this road. The dramatic vistas still slumbered under a deep blanket of ice and snow. Four-foot snow banks, cut at clean right angles perpendicular to the surface, enveloped the route. Due to the thawing temperatures, quagmires and mini rivers and snow-mixed-mud dotted the highway, increasing the danger but also the fun. I cut through the Amphitheatre Mountains like I was Marc Coma in the Dakar. I stopped at Maclaren Summit, admired the icy tundra, and hopeful anticipation caused me to mistake Mt. Hayes for Denali. Mt Hayes is still over 13,000 feet, impressive especially with a base-to-peak rise of 11 thousand feet, but it's no 20,000 foot peak rising 18000 above a 2000 foot base, like the Great One.

The immense, wide valleys in Alaska are snaked by a multitude of twisting, turning glacier blue rivers. The craggy pinnacles lift up ice fields and dreams skyward. I felt insignificant, almost meaningless in contrast, but concurrently that this landscape was made specifically for me at that moment.

The muddy surface hardened up and smoothed out, I got into a rhythm, into a meditation. I was the artist, my lines chosen on the highway my art, and I entered that divine flow time once again.

I embarked upon this adventure at a time of monumental transition. Only months earlier, I just married my wife, left my job, and moved half-way across the country. Sure, the impetus for the trip was learning and awareness building in the multifaith pilgrimage



arena, but there was an underlying deeply spiritual and emotional motivation, I realized at this moment of the Denali Highway. This pilgrimage was a ritual to mark this immense rite of passage, to process the emotions, to deepen my spiritual awareness, to cope with the transitions. I yearned to come out on the other side more human, mature, and more skilled in my relationships.

I had compromised a meaningful and fulfilling chaplain position at TCU, my friends and colleagues and my home in Texas, and my single life full of bachelor dreams, for love and partnership and intimacy. Even though I made the decision with my wife for love, I think I had anyway, I still experienced resentment, bewilderment, and grief. Maybe, it did feel wrong. A spiritual quest, since the days of my youth, provided me with the time and space to go out and live my faith, becoming a little more than I was, before coming home. Like when Jacob became Israel after wrestling with the Angel, I too, endured the pain of becoming who I am supposed to be. And even though I may walk with a limp, with scars of struggling with God, I am more complete.

The higher altitude tundra of the Amphitheatre Mountains gave way to the lower, greener, snowless black spruce. The road surface morphed into flawless, hard-packed dirt. I increased my speed to 65, stood up on the pegs, and felt the sensation of flying. After crossing the Susitna River, I ducked as a 2 person, Super Cub buzzed overhead at tree height. The airplane landed just up the road at the Clearwater Airport, which merely consisted of a bearded man and a pickup awaiting his pilot friend's arrival.

After 3.5 hour sojourn as the first motorbike of the season, I arrived at the Cantwell Tsesyu filling station on the Parks Highway. Clouds crowded the sky and threatened my opportunity to see The High One. Four years earlier, my family took a

dreary bus tour to Wonder Lake. The weather so poor, my dad read the entire text of *Into The Wild*. They say only one-third of visitors to Denali actually see the mountain, which is so massive it creates its own weather pattern. I still hadn't seen it yet.

I rode north on Parks Highway, basking in the energetic boost of joyful anticipation. While on the road, I perpetually turned my head like a nervous twitch up and to the left, knowing the mountain should be there. It wasn't. I rode on past the National Park gates. The High One would have to wait, on to Ester, outside of Fairbanks, to see my friend from college.

Just beyond the Stampede Road, where Chris McCandless began his final and tragic journey of self-actualization, a dark storm front ominously and swiftly rolled in. Alaska weather is classically unpredictable, changing dramatically from still to threatening. Rain began to pour down. The massive drops rapped loudly upon my helmet visor, then, blinding sleet. The frozen rain began to build up so thickly on my visor, I pulled over to the side. Visibility was almost zero. Then, I summoned the courage and trudged on through the dangerous conditions, wiping my visor and monitoring the air temperature gauge on the cockpit display that was hovering around 33. I vowed to stop indefinitely if it touched 32. I hit play on my GoPro helmet to capture the evidence.

After 20 minutes of enduring the monsoon-like sleet weather event, the sun revealed it's warming rays. I crossed the Tanana River at Nenana and journeyed the last 50 miles to meet Sarah at the Cold Climate Housing Research Center near the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I felt the irony as I rode my petrol guzzling two-cylinder machine past the never-ending wall of solar panels to the headquarters of an energy conservation

non-profit. Sarah snapped a photo of me riding in the foreground with the solar panels in the background.

I consider myself a person who attempts to live a green life. I recycle even if that means hauling my own items to the drop off location, take my own grocery bags, try to buy local, walk when possible, conserve water, and use energy efficient appliances. I try to reduce my carbon footprint. After all, I am a product of the 80s and Captain Planet. "With your powers combined, I am Captain Planet!"

But what does it mean to the environment, to my spirituality identity, that my choice mode of spiritual expression means burning fossil fuels at 40 miles per gallon? In the eyes of my friend and people like her, was I selfishly destroying the environment? Energy conservation, global climate change, and pollution are deeply spiritual issues that our present religious institutions have failed to address in a meaningful way. Maybe, I am part of the problem.

I greeted Sarah and she showed me around the grounds. Since Fairbanks regularly dips down to negative 40 degrees for long stretches in the winter, CCHRC was experimenting with many new techniques in their cold climate energy conservation building projects: foam insulation, geopolymers cements, ground source heat pumps, and solar thermal.

Sarah then climbed into her Subaru and I followed to her home in Ester, west of town. We turned right off of Parks Highway and proceeded to snake left and right up a 15 percent grade dirt lane. This might be better riding than the Denali. We pulled into the drive of their semi-remote, homesteader-esque residence. "They have to truck in our water," she noted, "They store it in a 500 gallon tank underneath the house. We are lucky

though. Many people around here don't have water." With the harsh, subzero winters, Fairbanks residence requires a special mix of hearty courage and craziness. I unloaded my gear, met Sarah's roommate, James, and then we went for beers and dinner at Silver Gulch in Fox.

Sarah played on the women's soccer team at my alma mater and became good friends with my class on the men's soccer team. Though we were close friends in college, we failed to interact very frequently over the last decade. James, a native Alaskan, who worked for an electric company was also an avid soccer player. All three of us enjoyed beer.

Traveling alone on the road for several days, I desperately needed conversation and company. We found seats at the bar and ordered up three Copper Creek Ambers at North America's northernmost brewery. The restaurant, complete with mountain lodge ambiance, buzzed with conversation and energy, filled to almost standing room only capacity. My neighbor, drinking solo, struck up conversation and proceeded to distract me from interacting with my hosts. He rode motorcycles, too. His KLR 650 was parked outside. He was a proper Fairbanksian. He resided in a remote dry cabin on 10 acres located outside town. I hoped he would slow down on the guzzling, I thought, he's a little boisterous and tipsy. After about 10 minutes of trading stories, he loudly proclaimed, "Jake, you were born to be an Alaskan. I can just tell. There's that something about you. You have to move up here." I glanced over at Sarah and Josh with an apologetic countenance and back at my new friend Rick. "I agree, I should move up here. I've thought about that for a while. I almost did a few years ago right after my first visit."

Back at the Ester abode, I plotted my sojourn up the Dalton Highway, sometimes called the Haul Road.

Early the next morning, a warm, sun-kissed day of opportunity commenced. I trekked north of Fairbanks on the Elliott Highway--a traffic-less 80 miles of beautiful mountain curves through the black spruce and granite. Then I saw it. It read "James W Dalton Highway" in white letters on a field of green. Scores of motorcycle logo stickers enhanced the sign's aesthetics, as riders who have come before me marked their triumph on one of adventure motorcycling's holy grails.

Stickers, in the adventure motorcycling community, serve as a form of social currency. Community respect correlates directly with the number of destination-denoting stickers displayed on the panniers, top cases, and plastics of one's motorcycle. Further, stickers promoting brands or individuals that are affixed to signs, like this one denoting the Haul Road, serve as trophies communicating the accomplishments of the rider. They also create a sense of community. When I start this engine and roll forward, I will become a member of an elite group of adventure motorcyclists. My mind wandered as I imagined who has come before me and what complexities permeated their lives at the time: a journey to celebrate life and experience joy; a trek to heal wounds and move past tragedy; a sojourn that bonded a father and son, a mother and daughter to a new level of love. I asserted that if adventure motorcyclists were a tangible community located in a particular space (rather than being spread out all over the world), I'd be the chaplain, the minister. Although, I wonder if I could be more effective than the road itself.

The Dalton Highway, 414 miles of adventure motorcycle heaven, was built parallel to the northern Trans-Alaska Pipeline System as a maintenance access road for

the pipeline and a thoroughfare for goods to reach Deadhorse and Prudhoe Bay. This pipeline system, powered by 12 pump stations, carries crude oil from the North Slope's Prudhoe Bay oil fields (North America's richest) south to the Valdez Marine Terminal, the nearest ice-free port. Large tanker shipping vessels then transport the oil.

My expectations of the Haul Road derived from two places: legendary myths about the hazardous riding conditions and treacherous road surface propagated throughout the motorcycle community; and the famous show, *Ice Road Truckers*, which chronicles passage over the frozen surface at negative temperatures. I expected vast, flat arctic tundra with horrendous obstacles: mud, potholes, and boulder-sized rocks. But for the first 60 miles to the Yukon River camp, spruce-lined, snaky mountain curves with superb road conditions refuted those expectations. My thermometer read 70 degrees. The melon sun with its azure backdrop created a dream-like environment. Every motorcyclist in the world would say that those were perfect conditions. "This is fucking awesome!" I boisterously confirmed aloud over the sweet hum the opposed cylinders.

After an hour devouring the ideal riding conditions, I approached the Yukon River ridge. The south side of the bridge, perched high on a cliff face, created a downward sloping grade to the north bank. As I rolled over the wooden slatted bridge surface, "What a weirdly appealing bridge. Super unique, I've never seen anything like this."

Just across the river, there was a small grouping of maintenance buildings, a few trailers, and a sign for a restaurant and hotel. With a brief glance to the left, I failed to spot a gas pump. I twisted the throttle and upshifted into 4th gear, then 5th. I stood up

on the pegs and flew with the white-tailed ptarmigan. But then fret and agony crept into my mind. Did I miss the only gas station before the Coldfoot truck stop? There may be nothing more effective to ruin a jubilant, spiritual high than worry.

After 6 miles of overthinking, I glimpsed a sign for the Hot Spot Cafe. I grabbed the front brake and stomped on the back. The rear wheel locked, skidded on the gravel surface, causing the bike to briefly wobble. I corrected the imbalance and veered left into a gigantic parking lot, obviously built for trucks.

The Hot Spot Cafe was composed of several kitschy, country chic maroon mobile trailers conglomerated together. I noticed several motorcycle stickers placed by my comrades on various decorations. That could only mean two things, I thought. Either the food or the company is going to be worthwhile, or both. It was both. I asked a preoccupied middle-aged woman with tender eyes but a stern face if they sold gas. "A trucker that had just arrived jumped to answer. Coldfoot's only 120 miles" "I can't make it that far," I contended. The tender eyed shop-keep reported "Nah, we used to sell it, but the only petrol before Coldfoot is back 6 miles at the Yukon River. You passed it. But why don't you have a BBQ sandwich and a coke. We just opened up today. You're early for a motorcycle. Maybe, the first one up."

While I was anxiously anticipating my meal, I shared conversation with Dick, a truck driver for Alyeska, the corporation that owns the pipeline. "Are you headed up to Deadhorse?" he inquired. "I'm thinking about it, but I'm worried about the snow up there on Atigun." Patty, the shop-keep, chimed in, "I heard that it's in the twenties and snowing up there. You better not risk it. Especially travelling alone." Dick challenged, "I just saw an old guy on a Harley ride up through there. You'll be fine."

I devoured my scrumptious pulled-pork masterpiece, bought a Hot Spot sticker to boast my achievement on my top-case luggage carrier, and backtracked to the Yukon River for gas. I entered the trailer, exhibiting a run-down exterior, but found a warm and inviting restaurant inside. I paid for 4 gallons of petrol and asked, Vicki, a college student at UA Fairbanks about the conditions on Atigun Pass, Alaska's highest road at almost 4800 feet through the mighty Brooks Range. The slender and handsome brunette coed claimed she just got off the phone with her cousin, a park ranger in the Gates of the Arctic National Park, who said 6 inches of snow had accumulated on the road surface in the last hour. With those words, I bid farewell to my dream of tagging the Deadhorse, at least on this adventure. Six inches of snow creates perilous, almost impassable operating conditions for a motorcycle. Let alone, I was traveling solo in one of the most remote and harshest climates in North America. Riding beyond the Arctic Circle and up to Coldfoot would have to suffice for me. I wonder if the Harley rider made it through, unscathed.

I trudged out to the above-ground petroleum tank to refuel and then remounted the 1200GS. Next stop: the Arctic Circle. A few miles pass, and I drift into an internal mental debate. Should I chance the possible treacherous conditions on Atigun Pass? Or should I let go of that dream for now? I realized that my attention was drifting away from the road. Focus. I need to focus on my art. Focus is the gift that motorcycling gives me. I must accept it.

Traveling, especially by motorcycle, throws the individual into a meditative, reflective state of being. One can question presuppositions and alter perspectives of one's self and one's world. When I focus on the road, my life comes into view.



For the next 60 miles, love, resentment, fear, and hopeful anticipation flooded my heart. A deep agape love for my wife of 9 months intermixed with resentment of the compromises for the relationship I chose to make in leaving an excellent chaplain ministry in Texas. A 9 month failed struggle to secure a full-time ministry position in Michigan had left me drained of energy, spirit, and self-confidence. I terrified I may never secure an equally fulfilling position again. The negative emotions of resentment and fear confusingly amalgamated with the positive emotions of married love and hope in things to come. I thanked the God who made this vast, magnificent Alaskan landscape, for this healing road I was riding at that moment, a road that was created just for me.

And just as my mind finished that eucharistic prayer, I crossed into the Arctic Circle. I pulled over into the rest area to snap a photo of the Arctic Circle sign with the bike in the foreground. Proof.

I followed the pipeline to Coldfoot, basking in every mile of this super-road's eminence, around sweeping turns, over glacier-feed rivers. I could see for miles. Miles across land. Miles into my heart.

The Coldfoot truck-stop had character. The parking area was rutted out. The exterior of the restaurant and store where dilapidated. The hotel consisted of a series of trailers attached together. A depressing gunmetal, charcoal hue of the structures dominated Coldfoot's mood. Then, I entered the restaurant to inquire about camping. As I walked through the door, I hit a wall of bustling energy. Truckers at card tables laughed gruffly and gregariously. Tourists marveled over the day's travels. The servers clanked flatware, plates, and trays.

The teenage cashier granted me permission to set up my tent near a small lake beyond the parking area. I rode through the mud ruts created by the massive tractor-trailer rigs and began to set up camp near a stone circle fire pit. I felt a wincing pain on my neck. Mosquitoes. The damn things were everywhere. I applied some 100 percent deet and finished making my temporary home.

I ordered a Silver Gulch at the bar, near a middle age couple with an Aussie accent. Jack and his wife, Katie, hailing from Brisbane, were touring Alaska with an Outdoor Adventure Company that provided opportunities for thrill-seeking clientele to hike glaciers, fish for king salmon and halibut, back country camp in the Brooks Range, and sea kayak in the Prince William Sound.

Jack inquired about my travels. "Is that your 1200GS I saw? Brilliant! We are huge adventure riders ourselves. Big fans of MotoGP, too. Hailing from Brisbane, Australia, Mick Doohan is our home town hero." Mick Doohan, from near Brisbane, won 5 500cc MotoGP championships and is considered one of the greatest ever to race.

"I pull for The Kentucky Kid," I offered. "We love Nicky Hayden, too," Jack agreed. "Believe it or not, we love to see him beat the other guys on the Ducati. Or at least finish in front of Casey Stoner. Even though Stoner's an Aussie, we've never liked him much."

Jack, energetically invited me to travel to Cape York, the upper Northeastern peninsula, for Australia's quintessential Adventure motorcycle ride. After 2 hours of lively two-wheel themed dialogue, we exchanged contact information, and I closed out my tab at the bar. How coincidental or maybe providential that I sat down right next to two adventure motorcycle enthusiasts at the most remote truck stop in the USA. A

shared interest or passion can connect people instantly, even though thousands of miles separated our lives. How can we cultivate that truth in the spiritual and religious world?

A common method, championed by the Interfaith Youth Core out of Chicago and other groups, consists of focusing on service to the community, justice work, and advocacy, rather than different theologies or beliefs. Through service alongside others who hail from different religions and philosophies, a bond forms which breaks down barriers that divide and builds bridges. Once these obstacles of xenophobia and prejudice fall, true connection, true conversation commences. And diversity becomes not a point of contention, but of celebration and beauty. Through deep conversation, conversion happens, and both parties are changed. Notice the words conversation and conversion contain the same root. It is this phenomenon that I am exploring on my interfaith pilgrimage. How am I converted by deep conversations with others? How am I converted by my intimate conversation with adventure itself and all that accompanies it? And hence, how are others converted and how are the communities converted? I have a hunch, that understanding conversion in a multifaith context, individually and communally, may be the key to answering religion and spirituality's most pressing question of the 21st century. But maybe it's a question that cannot be answered, merely experienced, lived.

In 2009, I began a two-year stint as Associate Chaplain at Texas Christian University. Little did I know when I began, most of my spiritual care-giving experiences would be with non-Christian students, many of them Muslim.

So there I was, a Presbyterian minister, providing spiritual care to Muslim students. I listened to their hardships and struggles, empathized with them in crisis, and

celebrated with them in success. I accompanied them on their spiritual journey, careful of the differences between our contexts, cultures, and religions. Several times, my spiritual identity and Christian faith were challenged and strengthened by these interfaith encounters. In observing the dedicated prayer life of many of my Muslim students, I reexamined my own Christian prayer life. In fasting with them during Ramadan, I deepened my own self-awareness. Hopefully, my students experienced our time together in such a relevant and consequential way.

I call this phenomenon interfaith spiritual care--spiritual care across religious boundaries. While interfaith spiritual care should not replace spiritual care given by a leader in one's own religious/spiritual community, I have found it can: transform and develop the spiritual identity of both parties, break down the walls of prejudice and bigotry, and build diverse communities that work for social justice together.

I liken religious expression to speaking a language. Christianity is the most foundational story of my religious existence. Analogically, it is my native tongue. But, in our increasingly multi-faith environment, it is compulsory that we learn a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth language, and so on.

Islam has become my second language. And while I will never be able to understand the meaning and nuances of Islam, like I understand Christianity, I can make strides by deeply engaging with my Muslim sisters and brothers. Through conversations, ministry experiences, and shared social justice action, I can learn to speak Islam more fluently. And result of these authentic interfaith encounters, both parties are changed. I incorporate a little bit more of the Muslim story into my story. My story becomes fuller and more complex.

Some people may claim that learning about Islam and relating to Muslim individuals will contradict their Christian faith and detract from their religious identity. But it's not true. Through interfaith encounters, I more fully speak the language of Christianity, and improve fluency in my second language of Islam. One's religious story is not a zero sum game.

To the critics of interfaith work who cite contradiction, I often have the urge to respond with the words Walt Whitman, the nineteenth century American poet, wrote in his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*, 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)'<sup>30</sup> The sentiment Whitman communicates here has helped me immensely in coming to peace with balancing the complexities of an interfaith life and speaking many different religious languages.

So in an effort to increase my second language fluency, I decided to read the entire Qur'an in 29 days, from the first Sunday in Advent through Christmas day. I called it *Advent With Islam*. I read four Surah (similar to chapters) per day and blogged about my experiences. Further, my Muslim friends and I enjoyed frequent conversations about the history, context, and interpretation of the Qur'an. New to the area, I also visited the local mosques in Coldwater, Michigan and Toledo, Ohio.

Prior to this project, I was aware of only one Muslim family in my rural area south-central Michigan. Now, I am connected with a local mosque that has over 500 Muslim members, mostly from Yemen.

Several of my former Muslim students from TCU stayed in frequent contact with me during my project. They sent me articles on the interpretation of the Qur'an, provided

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<sup>30</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: First and Deathbed Editions*, ed. Karen Karbiener, (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004).

historical and literary context, and answered my many questions. But then an interesting phenomenon occurred: three of these Muslim students decided to read the Qur'an along with me. One student confided, 'I've never actually read the text in entirety. Thanks for the inspiration to finally sit down and read it.'

I could not believe what was happening. I, a Christian, was inspiring Muslims to read the Qur'an. What a profound and humbling experience. And this is just a glimpse into the transformative power that interfaith relationship-building has on our spiritual lives and our communities.

Maira, one of the students who decided to read the Qur'an with me, had been very active in the Muslim Student Association and the Interfaith Community at TCU. She was an outstanding student, a political science major. She wore her hijab proudly on campus. I saw her as faithful and courageous.

Maira and I had developed a close spiritual care relationship. In the past, she shared with me her struggles concerning her future vocation. But while we were reading the Qur'an and dialoguing about it, she began sharing about her faith and her doubts, about her family and her relationships.

Maira shared with me something very sacred. "Jake, I'm starting to have doubts about my faith. I've never felt like this before. You see, I'm dating a Christian. He's asking me questions and pointing out contradictions in the Qur'an. And my family would not approve of me dating a non-Muslim. And they would not understand my doubts about Islam. I have no one to talk to about this. Would you talk with me about it?"

And so we talked for hours about her life, about faith, about relationships. I listened and empathized with her struggles. I offered insight from my experiences. I was blessed she trusted me with this very private part of her life.

Reflecting on this profound experience, I am struck by the fact that she felt safer telling me, a minister from a different tradition, about her struggles with Islam than she felt telling someone from her own religion.

I wonder if we can use my relationship to Maira as a window into the massive impact interfaith relationship-building can make in our lives, in our religious groups, and in our communities. How many people, like Maira, don't feel safe sharing important issues with their own Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or even Atheist family? How many people's spiritual lives, like Maira's and my own, could experience healing, growth, and transformation if only we could spread and promote interfaith relationship-building?

As a church, we must have the courage to cross the boundaries of our religious comfort zones, to interact with those who are very different from us. We must have the courage to face the complexities of interfaith encounters and their impact upon our own religious identity. We must be willing to sacrifice an easy definition of what we believe as Christians, for a more complex, relationship-based faith that lives out radical love and works tirelessly for social justice. This diverse, 21st century religious landscape demands it of us. The countless others, like Maira, out there demand it of us. And as a church, this may be our most vital mission. But we can handle it. Remember, '(We) are large, (we) contain multitudes.'

I waded through the parking area which resembled more of a 4x4 mud bogger's paradise, and began my evening ritual. With my belly full of ale and the truck stop's only option for dinner, a surprisingly tasty 40 dollar buffet, I wrapped up in a -20 degree down sleeping bag I borrowed from Molly's boyfriend, Josh. It was 10pm and still light. It took hours to drift into slumber, my mind pre-occupied with the concerns of travel. Should I attempt a ride to Deadhorse in this weather? What if I never get an opportunity to do this again? I hope I am safe here in this tent. It will be good to get back to Ester and spend time with Molly, Josh, and their crew. I hope it's good weather tomorrow. It was nice to meet Jack and Katie today, but I sure am lonely.

Damp from dew and joints stiff from the frigid arctic ground, I awoke early to another chance to choose to live. I breathed the cold life into my lungs and shivered. For a moment, I yearned for Pure Michigan, to be fishing Lake George on the dock Poppy built with a Two-Hearted Ale in my hand and my dearest wife monitoring my angling prowess from the boathouse deck. Late nights and early mornings, for me, have always been surreal, unfamiliar, even a little scary. Coldfoot tent-camping magnified this. I mustered the energy to cut through that sentimentality. With gusto, I opened the tent flap, stood upright, raising my arms and eyes to the horizon that promised adventure.

During my return trip, retracing my route back to Fairbanks, my attention wandered to another pilgrimage.

When I was in seminary in 2006, I had the privilege to tag along with my brother's undergraduate study abroad class to Greece, Turkey, and Egypt. The class was called Sacred Byzantium. We studied Byzantine Christianity, but also the other world religions of the region like Egyptian and Greco-Roman traditions, as well as Islam. Our



last destination was St. Catherine Monastery. St. Catherine's has its origins in the 3rd or 4th century as a Greek Orthodox monastic community. It is built on the site of the burning bush through which God appeared to Moses, and the bush is living to this day inside the monastery walls. Visitors, pilgrims have created a custom to place written prayers among the vines of this rather sizeable bush growing in the midst of an absolutely barren landscape. And not only is the burning bush there, but the monastery sits at the base of the famous Mt. Sinai where Moses received the tablets upon which the ten commandments were written (he received them twice if you remember the story, the first set were shattered in the golden calf fiasco).

But for me, the most amazing aspect of the monastery at Moses Mountain is its multifaith history. The monastery contains one of the world's most important and extensive religious libraries. Ancient manuscripts abound, some of which are the oldest translations of Christian sacred scriptures. As the resident librarian monk, who hailed from El Paso, energetically told stories relating to the manuscripts, one story really caught my attention. The library had an original letter written by the Prophet Mohammad. During the rise of the Prophet, and his followers in the Arab world, as the area including Egypt became Islamic, Mohammad, had written a letter to give to the Christian monks of St. Catherine. The letter was a peace offering to the monks, outlining Mohammad's, respect for their tradition, assertion of their value as friends of Islam, and the letter finally charged the Bedouin Muslims that lived around the monastery to protect the monastery from intruders, and to live in harmony with them as people of different faith in one community. That began what is now a 1,500 year old interfaith community of cooperation. The Bedouins still live in harmony with the monks, sharing resources,

meals, and a small business in the area offers a camel caravan for pilgrims to ride up to the summit of Moses Mountain.

My brother, our friend, and I decided to pass on the camels and ascend the mountain by foot. They have preserved the Path of Moses, which is also called the path of repentance, which ascends 3,700 steps to an elevation of 7,500 feet. We decided to try that pilgrim path, the same path of many monks and pilgrims who followed in the footsteps of Moses. But the most striking part of the journey was at the summit, where I found three religious sites, commemorating God's conversation with Moses. There was a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim site. All three faiths sharing the story, the wonder, the mystery of this great event. I remember sitting at the top, not thinking of my Christian identity, per se, but how I felt so connected to both Judaism and Islam. I wondered how our relationships with each other can be sometimes so strained and divisive, when we have a tradition of being a community of cooperation, love, and respect, in places like Sinai, a most holy and miraculous place, for hundreds of years.

I leaned the bike over, my body remaining perfectly upright. I slipped the clutch until the rear tire made traction with the gravely stone dappled path of my current pilgrimage, the silvery slate cylinder glimmered and sun-blinded my eyes momentarily as the pipelined snakes lined the pockets of Big Oil.

Deep emotions arose, catching my heart off guard. While I still had several days remaining on my motorcycle excursion, returning from Coldfoot, I realized that this was the beginning of the end. I achieved my dream of riding a motorcycle from the lower 48 northwards into the Alaskan Arctic. Now, I was heading back to where I had already

been. Somehow I knew that something deep inside me had changed dramatically on this pilgrimage from Portland to Coldfoot.

A tear ran down my cheek. "At this moment, I am at peace," I told myself. I had proven to myself that I could do this. I had proven that I was good at something, that I could do something great, even extraordinary.

For years, a constant, nagging voice in my head demanding achievement had driven my life. This voice had stolen my peace and my joy, as it perpetually asked for more. I could never relax. Whenever I did achieve something special, it was never enough to satiate my inner search for significance, for excellence. Due to this voice, I constantly yearned to be special, significant, even legendary. I had to matter.

As my fleeting moment of peace subsided, I began to feel uneasy and anxious. The bike started to feel wobbly, the throttle jumpy and erratic. Instantly, I worried about another flat tire. Several times I stood up on the pegs and peered over the front and back sides of the bike to check air pressure. There was nothing wrong or amiss on the bike. It was running perfectly.

Then why was I feeling anxious, even scared? At that moment, I realized there was something, some feeling or emotion or spiritual truth, deep in my subconscious, that I was uncovering.

I am scared of failure, of failing to achieve something meaningful in life. I am scared of being just a normal person, someone that wasn't special. I am underachieving in my life and I know deep down that I have so much more potential.

Immediately, then, I flashed back to my first sojourn to Alaska in 2008 with my brother and my parents. At this point of the trip, it was just me and my brother, my

parents were flying out to meet us later. We were hiking to Jenny Lake, a beautiful glacial body of water at the base of the craggy, ominous Teton mountain range in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I wanted to show my brother a special, even spiritual place. A 15 foot tall, monstrous granite boulder sat near the bank of the crystal azure waters. Five years earlier in 2003, I had climbed that boulder and mourned the loss of my grandpa during a summer philosophy course through Hope College called Self, Nature, and God.

I waded out into the water, scrambled up the steep face of the boulder, and plunged into the frigid lake. "Woohoo, it's cold! Bro, it's your turn!" He followed suit, screaming louder than me on his return swim to shore. He dried off, barely avoiding a touch of hypothermia. We lounged on the rock and basked in the grandeur of the landscape.

"Jake, what I don't understand is that you are so adventurous when it comes to nature, the outdoors, and sports, but you are so timid when it comes to interacting with people." That observation cut right to the core of my being, in the way only massive, life-changing truth can. Especially since it named a monumental growing edge in my character.

As I drew closer to Sarah's house in Ester, I wondered if my fear of how others perceived me or whatever it was (maybe shame?) that my brother named at Jenny Lake had truly controlled the arc of my life. That's why I am on this pilgrimage, to embrace the changing ways of the road and become a more courageous and self-confident person.

I pulled into the Gold Hill convenient store and stocked up on Sockeye Red IPA by Midnight Sun Brewing. It was only 3pm. Sarah and James wouldn't be back for several hours. Back at their house, I dismounted the BMW, cracked open a tasty libation,

reclined on a hardwood chaise lounge on their deck, and contemplated all that had transpired on the adventure.

After an evening of grilled salmon and craft beer socializing with the Fairbanks crew, I departed on a day trip to Manley Hot Springs, 165 miles away on the Elliot Highway. The ride was invigorating and interesting. The first portion mirrored the path to the Dalton Highway, but then veered west up a ridge with views of an immense valley and the distant Alaska Range. The road was windy and primitive. No cars. Just me. I stopped at a pull out and wondered if what I was looking at was Denali, over a hundred miles away. I think it was, most of it was visible, but haziness and distance removed some of its impressiveness at that time.

I continued onto the remote, isolated Manley Hot Springs, where James mentioned I would find some real gun-toting, libertarian, off-the-grid Alaskans. I did find a few friendly folks at the lone gas station, waiting for the attendant to return from home on his ATV. I suppose its common practice in such a small town to leave your job unannounced for a few minutes to run an errand. I purchased my fuel and walked out to my motorbike. A young man on a four-wheeler was strapping down a case of Budweiser. I guess there isn't much else to do in such a small, quiet town.

But I was unaware at the time of my visit that this little mining village of 70 people on the banks of the Tanana River was the site of the most gruesome spree killing in Alaska history. Michael Silka, in 1984, is believed to have killed 9 people, including a two year old and a pregnant woman.

Silka's vehicle was spotted near the boat launch area where six missing person's were last seen. Since Silka was under investigation for an unrelated homicide, the state

troopers descended on the area via helicopter. Evidence of the murders, including blood and used cartridges were found at the scene. An all day helicopter search for Silka commenced. Many hours later, the helicopter search team found Silka and offered a chance for him to surrender. Instead, Silka stepped out from behind a tree and fired a high-powered rifle at the helicopter, killing one state trooper and injuring another. From the air, troopers returned fire at Silka, killing him.

The next day the Fairbanks crew invited me to a cabin in the woods near Chena Hot Springs for the night. Tim, a KLR 650 rider, and I rode our bikes following the rest of the group in Josh's truck. The 50 mile ride was eventless until we lost the truck, which was our guide to the cabin. Tim knew vaguely the location of the cabin, so I followed him on the back roads of the Chena River State Recreation Area. His KLR, with a 21 inch front and much lighter chassis, handled the muddy, rocky terrain much more nimbly than my bullish, galoot of a road bike pretending to be a dirt bike.

Back a curvy, moss-covered lane with the sunlight ominously blacked out by overhanging black spruce and birch, a no-trespassing sign suspended by a chain gate blocked the entrance. This couldn't be the cabin because they'd already be here by now and the gate would be opened, logic demanded. For the next hour, we rode aimlessly wandering in hopes to accidentally find the cabin. Maybe they traveled straight to the hot springs, we thought. No luck. Finally, we tried the dark lane again and the chain gate had been removed. Sarah, James, Tim's wife, Katherine, were there. They stopped for groceries, and unbeknownst to us, we passed them enroute. They spotted us riding around, but thought we were freeriding, rather than lost. Sometimes miscommunication

bestows gifts unplanned. I just rode the back roads of interior Alaska with a new friend. Unplanned, but unforgettable. Adventure.

Another couple arrived later that night as we were roasting hot dogs over the open fire. Jackson had just returned from Denali's base camp. After spending weeks sleeping in a tent in a frigid, high altitude environment, he offered to stay in his tent outside so that I could sleep inside the warm, toasty cabin. "The cold doesn't bother me. I'm Alaskan." Yes. Yes, you are, Jackson.

Interacting with Sarah's close-knit friend group in Alaska brought to the surface a yearning for something similar in my life. Emily and I definitely had that in Louisville, where we both attended seminary. Social life in Texas was sufficient, but lacking, and in Michigan, it has been non-existent. Emily and I both have a free-spirited, individualist energy, but simultaneously yearn for connection in a community. How does one balance those two, seemingly contradictory, notions? I didn't know it at the time, but Emily and I would find that belonging, that peace, that sanctuary again, in a place that we had already been. As Jim James says in *My Morning Jacket's Circuital*, we were "heading right back in the place that we started out."

The next morning, stiff after sleeping on the cabin floorboards, I awoke to Katherine's culinary prowess, fantastic breakfast burritos. After a savory nosh, I offered my goodbyes and thanks to my dear friends and pointed the front wheel south towards Anchorage. "Maybe I will finally get to see this damned mountain," I yelled aloud, smirking to myself.

The next 100 miles were a dream. Ideal riding conditions: the air crisp, the immense scenery with its vivid hues of greens, browns, and blues, the growl of the

1200cc engine, the anticipation of Denali, Talkeetna, and then Anchorage with Uncle Frank.

But first, at Healy, I decided to explore the Stampede Trail made famous by Chris McCandless and his biography derived from his journal accounts, *Into The Wild*.

At first the road had a nicely groomed gravel surface that followed a winding river bed, but then several miles into the trail, small boulder sized rocks and one to two feet deep pot holes began swallowing up my front wheel and jolting my luggage carriers. I slowed my pace, stood up to allow my legs to absorb the shock, and allowed my dirt riding experience to shine. Just as I was feeling more comfortable on the hazardous surface, I heard a loud snap. The bike began to veer to the right and left, feeling out of balance. I pulled off and looked down at the pannier rack which is the mounting mechanism for the side luggage cases. The welding at a main joint had completely failed and caused the right case to dangle, barely attached.

They say the two most important tools in one's tool kit are WD-40 and duct tape. If it doesn't move and it should, use WD-40. If it moves and it shouldn't, use duct tape. The latter was the case, so I reach into my travel tool pouch, grabbed the duct tape, and reaffixed and supported the welding failure. It worked swimmingly, remaining in tact to Anchorage.

I continued down the Stampede trail and spotted a group of 15 volunteers collecting litter. I asked about the famous bus McCandless used as his temporary home, where he eventually died. Geoff, a tall, gangly teenager with patchy facial hair and a cartoon smile communicated that the road disappears shortly ahead and the bus is still 20 miles away. The bus visit would have to wait for another time. As I road back to the



main thoroughfare, I intently marveled at Chris McCandless's story. It's almost unbelievable someone's spirit can have so much passion to denounce civilization and lead a life solitary wilderness. Something drew him so powerfully to adventure and pilgrimage. I hope he wasn't scared at the end and found the freedom for which he searched.

I am a little like Chris. I'm definitely not as extreme, but I, too, was searching for freedom and self-actualization. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something remarkable, that I could be a supertramp, an adventurer. I remembered one of his final observations before he died, "happiness is only real when shared." This pilgrimage is teaching me how to go through and experience this loneliness, so that I can find real connection and the presence of Christ in community. I still have many ways to go.

Back on the Parks Highway, I passed the national park entrance. Just then my eyes snapped to the right, overwhelmed by a jolt of ecstasy, I raised my body towards its majesty. I stood erect on the pews, reached up to hit record, and pointed my GoPro camera right at it. There it was. Finally. It took two different trips over four years and many disappointed days. Denali.

While it's my job to describe in words the sights I witness, after all this is a travel memoir of sorts, as I write this, I am experiencing great difficulty naming the words to respectfully illustrate the grandeur of The Great One.

In the foreground, some of the most massive snow-striped rock monstrosities imaginable compelled awe. Then icy, dark-blue, craggy peaks of the Alaska Range rose above those impressive granite towers. Even higher, a layer of clouds shrouded the lower visible section of Denali, causing the peak to rise up, seemingly from nothing into the

sun. A dream would have seemed more plausible. My imagination could not do justice to this scene.

Denali, at over 20 thousand feet, is the highest mountain in North America. But with its base to peak rise of around 18,000 feet, it's the tallest base to peak mountain, not covered or partially covered by water, in the world. Everest's base to peak rise, at its most generous calculation, is 15,000 feet.

I paused my journey to Anchorage again and again to bask in the mountain's mammoth aesthetics. Each time, thinking to myself that this view was better than before. I turned onto the spur road to Talkeetna. On 2008's trip with my parents and brother, we missed Talkeetna. I need to see the town where many climbing trips to Denali commenced and where the inspiration originated for the hit TV series, *Northern Exposure*.

And again, another breath-stealing perspective of The Great One. I rode down the main drag of the funky, hip tourist town. The Denali Brewing Company was my stop for lunch. While I refrained from imbibing the tempting brews for safety reasons (I never ride even after one beer), I enjoyed a scrumptious Angus burger with aioli garnish and garlic fries.

Onto Anchorage. I arrived at my uncle's condo in the late afternoon, ready for a little rest and a real bed. We grilled salmon and sipped Bulleit bourbon on the back porch. I contemplated my next few days with the motorcycle rental. Tomorrow, I plan to take the motorbike to the Motoquest headquarters to deal with the broken pannier rack.

The next day, the motorbike rental company removed the faulty luggage case rack. The rear tire fender had failed as well. The metal alloy thread which housed the

bolt connecting the fender to the swing arm sheered off due to the rocky conditions of the Stampede Trail. They were extremely helpful and understanding of my predicament, both my rear tire blow out and the rack and fender problems. They offered three extra days of the rental and to reimburse me for the tire and lodging in Whitehorse, and I gladly accepted. We removed the luggage rack and I handed them the rear fender that was strapped onto the back of the bike. I rode off, thankful that I wasn't responsible for compensating them for the damaged parts. Renting a bike is an added stress that I could do without on an adventure of this magnitude. I vowed to ride my KTM 990 to the Great White North the next time. When will that be? Alaska's enchantment had gripped me and I was ready to return while I was already there.

That afternoon, I hiked a famous Anchorage trail up to the summit of Flattop Mountain. The cardiovascular exertion felt painful and liberating. I welcomed the contrast from sitting upright on an uncomfortable neoprene seat for hours on end. At the top of Flattop, I smiled at the sight of families snapping photos and laughing. They were proud of their accomplishment. Meanwhile, a gloomy downtown Anchorage provided a visible reminder of the concrete machine dragon everyone at the summit was attempting to slay.

After enjoying my uncle's company in Anchorage, Top of the World Highway's siren song beckoned for adventure. This remote highway, connected to the Al-Can by the Taylor Highway through the funky tourist dive of Chicken, boasts as the only alternative border crossing in and out of Alaska. Snaking over the peaks of three thousand foot mountains, the highway's massive winter snow accumulation coupled with the late thaw of the Yukon River at Dawson City caused a late spring opening. No bridges connect the

Top of the World to Dawson City over the Yukon, only a ferry transports vehicles and pedestrians. And the extreme temperatures delay the ferry season until the frozen river flows again. It was May 22 when the ferry opened for business, thus, I was forced to forego this route on my original ascension to the last frontier. Time to make this adventure happen.

I departed Anchorage at 9am, a particularly late start to tackle the 500 miles that lay ahead to Dawson City, YT. Making good time on the Glenn Highway aided by light traffic, I twisted the throttle to 75. The speed limit read 55. I leaned into a sweeping left hander that hugged a 200 foot jagged precipice, a spotted a state trooper heading towards me in the oncoming lane. "Oh, fuck. I'm done." I hit the brakes and slowed to 55. He slowed flashed his lights briefly, the siren screaming a quick, Bleep Bleep. As we moved past each other, he locked eyes with mine through his stereotypical aviators. He extended his index finger, pointing directly at me. "Shit, I could lose my license." He sped past me and I continued on, bewildered. "Do I pull over? Is another cop ahead to pull me over and take me to the station?" After a minute or two, I realized that it was just a warning, a rather ominous warning, but just a warning, nonetheless. For the next 50 miles, I rode the speed limit, thankful for the trooper's mercy. But then, the road opened up and so did the throttle.

I cruised through Tok and onto the Taylor Highway. I refueled at Chicken, vowing to spend some time exploring this kitschy mining-town-turned-hippie-hang-out on my return trip the next day. The road leaving chicken zigzagged along the banks of the hellish rust-colored Atwater Creek. Then I ascended to the Top of the World. The road surface was gravel-turned-mud due to the freshly plowed snow banks melting back

across the route. At certain points, the snow banks towered ten feet skyward with a sharply cut vertical edge. It was as if a giant equipped with the world's largest carving knife effortlessly shaved away the snow to provide me safe passage. "What kind of machine could do this?" I marveled.

I crossed the border without delay, excited to explore the romantic gold rush dwelling of Dawson City. The Top of the World Highway might be my favorite road in Alaska. The vistas of bald, rounded mountaintops and severe valleys stirred that sought after feeling of extraordinary adventure. I approached a GMC dually pulling a fifth wheel, only the third vehicle since Chicken. I passed the rig effortlessly at 55, inadvertently throwing a cloud of dust into the truck's path. I descended a series of switchbacks into the Yukon River Valley and cut the engine at the ferry entrance. It was 7pm. Nine hours of non-stop motorcycling. Before the ferry returned to the west side of the river, the GMC dually stopped behind me. I approached his window and apologized for the dust. He asked me where I started that morning. "I left Anchorage at 9am this morning." "Holy shit, we left Anchorage, too, but at 4am."

The Yukon River's waters are deep and the current mighty. The ferry struggled towards us, traveling in an exaggerated crescent moon shape to most efficiently maneuver the current. Ferries treat motorcycles as royalty. I was first on, first off.

I hit play on my Go Pro and explored Dawson City in awe. Bonanza! The center of the Klondike Gold Rush boasted circa late 19th century architecture, restaurants, saloons, and boardwalks. I passed Jack London's cabin where he lived during the winter of 1897-98, which inspired his featuring of Dawson and nearby Forty Mile in his classic, *The Call of the Wild*. Then I glimpsed a building-side mural that read,

The Spell of the Yukon  
I wanted the gold, and I sought it;  
I scrabbled and mucked like a slave.  
Was it famine or scurvy--I fought it;  
I hurled my youth into the grave.  
I wanted the gold and I got it--  
Came out with a fortune last fall;  
Yet somehow life's not what I thought  
And somehow the gold isn't all.  
--Robert W. Service

Klondike Kate's was my lodging for the night and Diamond Tooth Gertie's my entertainment. After getting settled in my most expensive but most adequate room of the trip, I ventured to witness a Gold Rush gambling hall in all of its recreated glory. Gertie's exploded with energy as I entered. I ordered an Ice Fog IPA at the bar from one of the many hipster-tatt'ed Canadian college students employed in Dawson for the summer season. I chose a table near the front of the stage, eager to witness the cancan dancers' performance. Four cancan dancers, probably coeds from Ontario, took the stage. The master of ceremonies, named Gertie of course, sang medleys. Then, towards the end of the show, while I was finishing my fourth Ice Fog, a muscle-toned brunette, definitely the most aesthetically pleasing of the foursome, picked me to join her on stage with three other victims. I was the third audience member to drunkenly slur the tongue twister, Sally Sells Seashells. I either recited the words flawlessly or I botched them in the most amusing manner because I was chosen as the winner and then invited to remove my cancan dancer's garter. I whispered to the dancer, "I don't use my mouth do I?" She responded, "You can do it about any way you like." Feeling awkward and self-conscious, I shyly removed it with my hand. I am married, remember?

When the strong loneliness of the road and really of my entire life mixed with four strong beers, I was encountered with true human desire, true sexual desire. I am married and love my wife, but I am also lonely and human.

I've always been an outsider my entire life. I've never really felt like I belonged to a particular group. I've been on the margins of the church, of school groups, of athletic teams, of academic societies, of music ensembles. This is partly due to the unique way I was raised, my contrarian and rebellious nature, but it's also due to the different way I see the world and the vastly variant ways I imagine and experience community. My search for true community is the beauty of this pilgrimage and it's also the curse of the loneliness and desire I am feeling on the stage with the cancan girl. And this girl was brought to me on this trip for a reason. To identify my need to find real connection in my life, with my wife and with community. The church can learn from this cancan girl as well, that it must acknowledge and deal with true, human connection and desire, especially sexual connection and desire.

The next morning, I awoke with an Ice Fog hangover headache. Not the most ideal way to start a day of wilderness riding, but a greasy western omelet at Klondike Kate's restaurant provided relief. I rode towards the ferry to re-cross the Yukon River. An adventure company advertised jeep rentals to traverse the super-remote Dempster Highway, 457 miles of gravel treachery ending at Inuvik, Northwest Territories, the northern-most point on the highway system in Canada. Another famous adventure motorcycle route, but "that will have to wait until next time," I told myself.

As I attacked the Top of the World, my mind wandered to a thesis question of my pilgrimage. What happens to me when I interact with a person of another faith or

philosophy? How am I supposed to reconcile the particularity of Christian commitment to the diversity of religions throughout America, the world that I feel so connected with as well?

This question is my version of Robert Pirsig's Chautauqua in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or his underlying thesis that tried to reconcile the dichotomy between art and science, or the dichotomy of the romantic and the rational. Pirsig finds through treating a rational task such as motorcycle maintenance as an art, remaining truly in the moment with an end goal of quality, one can bridge the gap. Both rationality and romanticism can co-exist. And he posits, this reconciliation would cure many evils and difficulties of modern existence. Quality is truth.

Like Pirsig, I see the dichotomy in my Chautauqua as a cause for much pain and suffering in modern existence. The divide between the strong particularity of one religious belief with the unlimited complexity of religious diversity creates havoc in our individual consciousness which translates into evil and tragic manifestations in our communal lives. Wars, prejudice, hate crimes, poverty, bigotry, bullying, fear, depression, low self-esteem, patriarchy, among others, have at least a partial origin in the inability to reconcile faith's particularity with faith's diversity.

Some have attempted to solve this Chautauqua through a pluralistic view, most basically believing all religions and even non-religious belief, like atheism, have equal value or at least all carry merit. Whichever belief is best for the individual is true. Others cling adamantly to their particular flavor of religion, ostracizing and denouncing all others simultaneously attempting to proselytize the masses to adhere to their narrow



interpretation. Even some others respond to the difficult dichotomy by abandoning religion all together, deeming it too complex or too unbelievable.

My hunch is that the answer lies in the experience of religious diversity. It's experiential. It's phenomenological. When our particular beliefs converse with another's different beliefs, in the context of the multitudes of diverse beliefs, the reconciliation begins to happen. That's what this pilgrimage is about--to experience conversion, for our experiences of religious diversity to change us. Conversion is the key. The root word is converse, to engage another in conversation. And it is this experience that bridges the gap. We have to willing to be changed, to be converted, to better understand religion's most difficult question. And this very experience is a deeply spiritual act, and may be the foundation of religious expression. And like Pirsig suggests, truth is not rational dogma or scientific proof (as if those could exist in the religious realm), truth is quality--quality in our interactions, our relationships, our lives. When we truly seek what is good, just, and beautiful in our religious lives and relationships, transformation is catalyzed and faith is created.

Sometimes through these encounters we better understand our own particular faith. Sometimes we may learn something from another and incorporate it into our own faith. Sometimes we may do the difficult task of acknowledging and holding the tension between two contradictory tenets. Maybe we arrive at the idea that religion, faith, belief, philosophy is so large and all-encompassing that we cannot even begin to systematize it realistically. Maybe we realize that the faith of the other isn't for us. Or maybe we experience a deeply sad reality that the other's belief system or unwillingness to engage is repulsive and unworthy of respect. Or maybe this encounter deepens the confusion and

complexity of our religious and spiritual awareness. And we are forced to accept this ambiguity or we are urged to rework our religious schemas, even our own identities. And many times, these encounters aren't overtly spiritual or religious, but a certain understanding or truth is gleaned that changes us.

But it is the pilgrimage of conversion that is the business of faith in a religiously diverse world. If we remain complacent, only interacting with people of the same faith specifically, we cease growing spiritually and fail to start answering the Chautauqua. While beliefs remain important, the acting out of faith through experience is the paramount expression.

Here, like Pirsig's dichotomy of rational and artistic, we have a similar phenomenon. Religious beliefs have evolved to become equivalent to believing something to be true--rationality. This is a mistake. Logic when utilized as a tool or a means not an end best serves religious endeavors. Whereas, practicing faith through religious encounters--conversing, serving, listening, empathizing, helping--is an art. It takes practice and points towards a deeper, complex truth that cannot explicitly be named. Like the notions of love, death, the meaning of life, eternity, these can only be grasped through artistic means. This artistic quality is the end of religious expression.

Religious belief mediated through a lens of artistic expression of quality unites the rational and artistic, and thus, the chasm that exists in today's sometimes hostile, religiously diverse world. An adventure motorcycle pilgrimage is my key to bridging the gap. It's my way of living my religious life with an eye towards quality as an end, and through these genuine encounters, faith is created, a faith that transcends characterization and labeling. It is my version of Pirsig's combination of Zen and

motorcycle maintenance. I could call it Religious Diversity and the Art of Motorcycle Pilgrimage.

I return to Chicken and park my motorbike at the Chicken saloon. Inside, a local gold miner was drinking away his day off. Dollar bills and panties hung from the walls, which of course, is the universal sign for a great tourist dive. I purchased a few Chicken stickers to affix to my luggage cases and returned to the road for Tok.

Before my pilgrimage, I read about Thompson's Eagle's Claw Motorcycle Only Campground which was tonight's planned stay. After buying a six pack of Alaskan IPA and pack of American Spirit cigarettes, my first breakdown in will power since the Shinto shrine, I turned into the entrance of the campground which was surrounded by tall spruce. The sign at the entrance instructed the visitor to choose a type of dwelling for the night--camp site, wall tent, tee pee, or an ambulance--and the owner would be around later to collect the very reasonable fee.

I rode around the grounds and spotted the ambulance tent site. Though a sort of morbid irony manifested with the thought of sleeping in an ambulance on an epic overland motorcycle trip, I chose the opportunity for a 20 dollar nights sleep protected from the environment (read: bears) couldn't be forsaken. The site boasted a blue tarp awning covering the side doors of a circa 1980s white and orange medevac from nearby 40-Mile, complete with the gurney adapted into bench seats.

Vanessa, the owner, came by to collect my fee for the night and mentioned I was the first motorcycle of the season. She exuded a gentle jubilation that caused me to feel I had known her all my life while sharing stories of her Alaskan lifestyle. She and her husband lived in a school bus for many years, after moving up to the Last Frontier. With

a woodstove serving as the only heat during the harsh winters, she said the floor of the bus would freeze the skin of your bare feet instantly and at head height it was 90 degrees. I liked her immediately. She and her husband were Harley enthusiasts and dreamed up the campground together. They eventually divorced and Vanessa bought out his share. Her days are spent working at the local airport nearby and her evenings at the campground. We shared stories until we ran out and she retired to her house on the property. That night I had the entire camping grounds to myself. I enjoyed my soundest nights sleep of the journey.

I rose early the next morning at first light, packed the panniers, and rode towards the heart of the Wrangell St. Elias National Park and the famed copper mining towns of McCarthy and Kennicott. I arrived at Chitina, a small town at the confluence of the Copper and Chitina Rivers.

The road veered left into a narrow, dynamite-created passage through sheer rock faces on either side. I began sixty tasty dirt road miles to McCarthy. The Copper River revealed its massive misty countenance. Gumdrop-shaped aquamarine domes rose from the banks of the legendary salmon fishery. I stood on the pegs as I crossed its murky waters. A violent gust of wind slammed my left side from the north causing my bike to veer dangerously close to the guardrails of the bridge. On to the other bank of the river, energized by adrenaline, I marveled at the dozens of giant fish wheels harvesting countless sockeye. The Copper is one of two rivers in Alaska where this practice is legal. Its sockeye run is the earliest of the year. Many of these two million spawning delicacies will be dispatched at great cost, especially to the environment, to the lower 48 to satiate gourmands of restaurants with five stars.

I pulled to the roadside to devour the vista and swill some java. As if I were invisible, a camouflaged, heavily armed Alaskan hunter on an ATV motored directly towards me, veered left to narrowly avoid a collision, and then dismounted. Only ten feet downhill from my location and continuing to ignore me, he peered through his high-powered binoculars in search of his prey, maybe a moose or even a bear. The hunting rifle slung across his back and his apparent ignorance of my presence caused a fluttering of anxious thoughts. While unwarranted and illogical, I wondered for a moment if my life was in danger. Traveling alone and vulnerable in the wilderness caused a primal fight or flight response. After a few seconds of an I-need-to-get-the-hell-out-of-here feeling, my rational voice kicked in, and I talked myself down. I snapped a picture of the hunter, marveled at the oddity of this encounter, and continued down the road.

Those 60 miles to McCarthy emerged as the most technical and exhilarating of all the roads in Alaska. Swampy, potholed sections opened into razor sharp rocks intermixed with cavernous ruts that swallowed the BMW's front wheel. For the first 20 miles, I proceeded gingerly due to my concern for damaging the rental bike further. But the slow pace seemed to worsen the jolts and rattles of the road, so I removed worry from my mind and attacked the dirt like a motocrosser. It was the correct strategy and made for a smoother ride.

The Edgerton Highway/McCarthy Road follows the defunct route of the railway that transported the copper haul to the Copper River. Then, the copper was loaded and shipped down to the Copper River Delta at Cordova to be sent worldwide. Almost to McCarthy, I reached the Kennicott River footbridge, the only crossing over to McCarthy and Kennicott.

I stopped to ask a local where to park the bike. He told me I could ride across the four-foot wide bridge. I did a double take. "You mean to tell me I can ride my motorcycle across that footbridge?" I still couldn't believe it, but I proceeded as directed. It was one of those times where motorcycles allow you access to areas restricted to others. I explored McCarthy and the abandoned mine at Kennicott with its towering red buildings and views of copper green valleys and glaciers.

I searched for a restaurant back in McCarthy for a lunch-time nosh. Nothing opened until later. Instead, I settled for a Clif bar and a canteen of coffee. The next stop on my list was the infamous port town of Valdez via the spectacular Thompson Pass. The 60 mile McCarthy road seemed much shorter on the way out of the massive Wrangell St. Elias Wilderness. I put my trust in the motorcycle and let the 1200 cubic centimeters and the high tech suspension do the work.

I headed south on the Richardson Highway towards Valdez. Cloud cover emerged and the rain began. Thompson pass at 2,800 feet in elevation is the snowiest locale in Alaska with about 551 inches of snowfall annually. As the elevation increased, the temperature plummeted towards freezing. My eyes nervously served as sentinel to the thermometer gauge. At the summit of the pass, it read 33 degrees Fahrenheit. A frigid, pearly blanket preempted the attempts of any plant life to take hold.. An eerie feeling of the absence of life consumed me. "I shouldn't be here," I shuddered. But experiencing lifeless, inhospitable environments like Thompson Pass often provide an unparalleled awe, perspective, and appreciation for the contrary. I snaked down to the shores of Valdez, flanked by bridal waterfalls.

Road construction halted my ambivalent experience of the Chugach mountains. A chain-smoking 20 something flagger recommended the Totem Inn as a cheap bed for the night. The rate was 125 dollars, not cheap by any means, but a deep, freezing exhaustion had crept into my bones. I would've paid 300 if it meant I didn't have to climb back on my bike and search for another hotel.

I rushed to my room, hurriedly discarded my riding gear and undergarments, and huddled under the life-giving warmth of the Shower Massage head. I needed a drink and some company. Reinvigorated, I walked next door to Landshark's Bar. I chose a seat in front of the craft beer taps. The ambiance of tacky Jimmy Buffet's Parrothead paradise seemed like it was trying to hard. But the clientele was getting rowdy, and with AWOLNation's 'Sail' playing on the jukebox, a song my brother promoted over the airwaves of privately-owned, indie CD102.5 in Columbus, I felt a little at home.

After two Alaskan IPA's, I sauntered outside to the patio to proposition a fellow patron for a cigarette. Justin turned out to my cigarette supplier for the night. He was tall, skinny with pale skin and sunken eyes. His nose protruded from his face as if it were a topmast on a clipper. Justin's soul seemed sad and lonely. He was a contract worker for Alyeska, working on the pipeline. He pointed to his camper on the bed of his truck in the adjacent parking lot. "I work, then I come here. I've been up here for 6 months. I'm recently divorced and my kids are back in Oregon, so it's pretty lonely, but at least the money is good." I empathized with that notion and headed back inside for another of Alaska's finest hoppy libation.

When I returned, Justin seemed different. The manner in which he talked and his body language exuded a sort of violence. He began invading my personal space and his

speech oscillated between physical compliment and emotional manipulation. His eyes were glazed, leaving his sad soul empty. The ‘blessed community of the road’ I was finding on this trip seemed not to include Justin. I left for my hotel bed.

The next day, I awoke to dreary haze and rain, similar to the day before, but colder. I explored Valdez before returning to Anchorage. I recalled the stories of Captain Joe Hazelwood of the Exxon Valdez, legendary for his all night benders. The night before the famed oil spill Captain Hazelwood imbibed heavily on blended Scotch.

With Hazelwood too hung over to operate the ship, the third mate took over. In the Prince William Sound, the Exxon Valdez crashed into the Bligh Reef, spilling millions of gallons of crude oil into this pristine, northern ecosystem. Heartbreakingly, the spill depleted the salmon and herring population and negatively impacted avian and mammal populations as well.

Then, I spotted a sign commemorating the earthquake of 1964 that absolutely devastated the town. A magnitude 9.2 earthquake, the second strongest in recorded world history, caused a massive underwater landslide, killing 30 in Valdez. The harbor, docks, and piers collapsed into the water and much of the city was destroyed. In response, the city moved three miles away to higher and more stable ground. 139 people died from the effects of that earthquake, which included soil liquefaction and tsunamis. Even as far south as Crescent City, California, deaths were reported.

With those two pieces of almost unbelievable, tragic history, I began my last full day of riding of this first of three portions of the pilgrimage. Sullen and sad, I marveled at the harsh, randomness of life on this planet. Sometimes, with such meaningless suffering and inexplicable tragedies, I wonder how we are not all nihilists.



The road construction caused for much longer delays on the return trip. With the harsh weather conditions, I felt a rage building up inside me. I was the fourth vehicle in the line behind the pilot car, and we were creeping along at 2 or 3 miles per hour. I yelled as if they could hear me in their bone dry, climate controlled autos, “It’s fucking hard to go this slow,” as my hand was aching from slipping the clutch to keep the engine from stalling. “Are you kidding me? Drive!”

I endured the blinding rain, slow pace, and almost sub-freezing temperatures, then, I ascended Thompson Pass. It began to snow. At first, I turned desperately nervous as the thermometer read 32 degrees. But moments later, adrenaline catapulted me into a hyper-focused mode. I trusted the bike and my abilities. I twisted the throttled and belted out “One Big Holiday” by My Morning Jacket with confidence. I don’t think this is quite the vacation Jim James had in mind. Later that afternoon, I returned to my uncle’s abode. We ate steaks and drank Bulleit bourbon.

The next morning, I took the GS out for one last spin. First stop: the First Presbyterian Church in Anchorage. I arrived unannounced, but thought I could just drop in on a fellow Presbyterian pastor without difficulty. I was wrong.

First Presbyterian hosts a Native Presbyterian congregation in their chapel on Sundays. Now, a thriving congregation, with a full-time pastor, was once a mission of First Presbyterian to minister to rural Alaskan Natives who have relocated the comparative metropolis of Anchorage. The members of First Presbyterian created this ministry to assist Natives in the adjustment to the culture changes of the city by connecting them to other Natives, and they also aided in job applications, food, housing, family and medical services and other necessities of survival.

I arrived at the church on a Saturday. The previous Sunday, a tumultuous event occurred, described in this press release (by the largely white governing body, Yukon Presbytery and First Presbyterian Church):

Last Sunday an Alaskan Native woman and her daughter, who regularly attend Anchor Presbyterian Church, arranged to meet the mother's adult son at church. However, the mother forgot to tell him that she attends Anchor Presbyterian. Her son went to the First Presbyterian Church. After not finding the son at Anchor Pres., the mother and daughter went to First Pres. to look for him. A female member of First Presbyterian happened to be outside the sanctuary. The mother was dressed in her Native regalia, and the woman outside the sanctuary assumed she was looking for the Anchor Presbyterian Church. She told her, "The Native church is down that way." The mother explained that she had just come from there and was looking for her son. She asked if they could peek in and check. The First Pres member said the worship service was almost over, if they wanted to wait.

After this encounter, the family reported a severe incidence of racism on the church's Facebook page. While one cannot be absolutely sure as to the events that transpired, the First Presbyterian Church member inflicted micro-aggressions, if not full-blown racist actions, towards the native family. While the church member may not have attempted to act overtly racist, racism occurred. Further, whether or not the intentions of First Presbyterian were innocent, their ministry to the Natives systemically participates in a tragic and brutal history of racism, oppression, and disenfranchisement of Natives throughout North America. The differences of power and privilege between the white

Presbyterians and the Native Presbyterians, whether covert or overt, are carried out and felt daily, the weight and pain of which lands upon the Natives.

I walked into that church six days after the event transpired. I held no knowledge of the heated environment I approached.

This church intrigued me. I wondered how the two very different congregations coexisted, how the community balanced the heritage of the Natives with the traditions of the Presbyterians, and personally, how the forced migration of the Natives influenced my idea of pilgrimage and the spirituality of travel. These Natives were forced to embark upon the Trail of Tears, a migration, an exile, away from their homes, as the white Europeans stole their land and destroyed their spirits.

As I entered and approached the pastor's office, I heard energetic but muffled conversation. As I reached out to knock on the open door to mark my arrival, the conversation escalated to heated shouting. As the pastor and female congregation member heard my fist rapping on the oak door, their furious and suspicious eyes swung around to meet my innocent gaze. The tired, 60-something pastor suffering from male-pattern baldness approached me without speaking. He flung the door closed and shrieked, "What are you doing, barging in here? Wait in the narthex!"

Twenty minutes later, the suspicious congregant shuffled out the door and the unwelcoming, bald pastor reluctantly invited me into his messy office. I apologized for my unannounced visit and presented my motorcycle project in some detail. I inquired about attending worship the next day. He cautioned me. "We have some serious issues to deal with tomorrow between the congregations and we'd prefer no outsiders. I'm sorry if

I seem to be inhospitable, but I'm under a lot of pressure, I need to get this sermon done, and I don't have any more time to waste."

I departed the building puzzled and hurt. As a fellow Presbyterian minister, I expected a warm welcome and inspired conversation. I never anticipated being forced to leave, forbidden to return for worship the next day.

As I remounted the 1200GS, a jovial man, Burt, with friendly eyes struck up conversation. He asked about the performance merits of the 1200GS for his upcoming motorcycle sojourn to South America. He and his son were planning to ride from Peru to Patagonia via back roads and wilderness. I suggested looking into a KLR 650. "It's cheap, reliable, easier to maintain and find spare parts, and more capable off-road." "That's important down there," he said, "I'll check those out. But it's hard to pass up the horse power and comfort of the big twins." We exchanged motorcycle stories for almost 30 minutes. I wished him safe travels on his upcoming trip. He thanked me for the advice and exclaimed, "It never fails. Motorcyclists are the most welcoming and interesting people I meet."

As I rode towards Girdwood on the Turnagain Arm, sandwiched by sheer rock faces on the left and the mysterious tidal waters of the Cook Inlet on the right, I pondered the juxtaposition of the two conversations: gruff, terse, and sad conversation in a Presbyterian church with a colleague in ministry and an inspiring, joyful conversation with a motorcycle-riding stranger.

Much of my life, I've wrestled with the reality that I've often preferred the company of atheists, agnostics, and non-Christians to my fellow Jesus followers. I've wondered to myself, "Is there something wrong with me? Is my faith too weak? Am I not

a good Christian? Maybe I need to be more like those *other* Christians.” However, in my heart and in my bones, I knew that the sort of Christianity those *others* were practicing wasn’t authentic. They all held the same beliefs. They were hesitant, if not, hostile towards interacting with diversity. It felt like they were disingenuous in their relationships, as if they were in sales pushing a product. Their faith seemed to narrow their vision and admonish against learning. And honestly, they were all so boring.

I preferred to hang out with my super-smart, secular Jewish friend who challenged my intellect. I’d rather engage in lively philosophical discussions with my atheist neighbor. I, instead, yearned to explore the non-white neighborhoods with my pluralist, pantheist Godfather. I desired to learn from my Muslim and Hindu friends about their beliefs.

Christian faith has remained an important aspect of my identity throughout my life, however, it exists in a context of openness, compassion, diversity, growth, and discovery. These are the Christians I appreciate and who interest me. If this context is compromised, I experience Christian faith as shallow, lazy, ignorant, angry, even destructive. I vowed never to associate with Christians who promoted the lie that we should only interact with other Christians in order to strengthen our faith. What they were truthfully saying to me is, “We are scared if you interact with people who believe differently, you might be changed by the experience, and not find our narrow, fear-based, elementary expression of Christianity adequate any longer. Plus, it’s a lot harder to control you, if you realize that there are so many different and beautiful truths in the world.” I’ve never respected anyone who cannot acknowledge the necessity of doubt in

faith, that Christianity does not hold the monopoly on truth, and that it may not even be the most consequential religion for a particular individual or group.

I've always felt uneasy around a group of people who value believing the same things and close off themselves from variant world views, values, and growth. I'd sacrifice my Christianity if it meant ceasing to: challenge my beliefs, learn from diversity, and interact with non-Christians. In order to really challenge one's faith and invite transformation and growth, which is necessary for healthy Christian identity and living, one must be willing to be truly changed by experiences, even if that means leaving behind one's current type or brand of faith.

So what was the unpleasant interaction with the pastor and the congregant all about? I'm not saying that these Presbyterians were narrow-minded and lacked compassion. Obviously, many difficult issues transpired. But sometimes the pressures of a religious community, bolstered by the power and superstition of ultimate things, create an inhospitable environment. Sometimes, institutional expectations placed upon religious leaders and members of the congregation cost the sacrificing of the most important aspects of the church: hospitality, openness, and accepting people as they are. The motorcyclist was like church to me. The pastor acted more like Sonny Barger, the famous founder of the Hell's Angels.

Now in the outskirts of the small, quirky town of Girdwood, I glance up to the world-class ski resort of Alyeska. I meander around the town, taking note of the solar panels, yurts, Subaru Outbacks, and microbrew coffee shops. I pull into the ski resort parking area and spy a chapel. As I moved closer, I noticed that the chapel holds both a Roman Catholic Mass and a Church of Latter Day Saints service on Sundays. I chuckled

and said under my breath, “As the Christian spectrum goes, Catholics and Mormons could not be more different. This chapel could teach a lesson that the rest of the country needs to learn.”

As I returned alongside the mud flats of the Turnagain Arm created by the drastic low-tide, I realized that my first pilgrimage was over. In a few days, I would fly to Virginia to accompany my wife to her interview for a pastor position in Radford, Virginia. I didn’t know it at the time, but over the next two years, I would embark upon two more major motorcycle pilgrimages to complete this project, my personal and professional life would endure catastrophic valleys, and then I would experience the circuital providence of faith.

## **CHAPTER 5: PILGRIMAGE II: THE TESTING OF ADVENTURE, TRANSFORMATION**

With tears pouring from my puffy, reddened eyes like the deluge of a Mid-western summer thunderstorm, I glanced at the Appalachian who forced a stoic face to hide her deep distress. I twisted the KTM's throttle reluctantly. "Why am I doing this? I don't want to leave." I pulled onto route 11 that runs through Christiansburg, Virginia and headed west.

Almost exactly one year to the day from my first motorcycle pilgrimage, I was embarking upon another. But this time, the circumstances had changed drastically. This time, I was riding to cope, to heal. Like the famous Rush drummer, Neil Peart, I was a *Ghost Rider*<sup>31</sup>, a fraction of my former self.

The Appalachian had returned from working at the Presbyterian summer camp, Massanetta Springs, where she had attended all her life and had been formidable in influencing her faith and call to ministry. During worship at the middle school conference, in the middle of one of her favorite worship songs, she realized she wasn't happy. She returned to our home in Christiansburg after a two-week absence.

After several days of excruciating conversation and a request for a leave of absence at my hospital chaplain job, I left our home indefinitely for an informal separation. Leaving a fantastic, fulfilling job and moving twice in a year to support the

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<sup>31</sup> Peart, *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road*.



Appalachian's career aspirations had left me somewhat resentful and depressed, but I was absolutely surprised, even dumbfounded that it had come to this. Considering the situation, I thought I was being, at the very least, a decent husband.

But there I was, leaving my wife, my home, and my job, maybe forever. My KTM Adventure and I headed off in the morning haze. I planned to stay with a former classmate of mine in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We shared in a unique spiritual, supportive relationship with each other. There was no better place for me to cope and heal than the therapeutic company of the American Southwest.

As I was accelerating towards my new found, be it depressing, reality, the KTM's engine cut off at 45 mph. I skidded to a halt, and restarted the machine. I re-entered the highway, accelerated, and again, the engine stopped. Once more I tried to continue, but there was something very wrong with my trusty stead.

I had only ridden 2 miles from our house. I dismounted the bike and dialed the Appalachian—straight to voicemail. Again, I called. Nothing. Again. Nothing.

I began hiking back along a busy highway, fully decked out in adventure motorcycle gear—jacket, pants, motocross boots. Calling every few minutes, I received no reply. Nine times in total. Sweating, distraught, I could never remember a lower point in my life. Finally, I made it to the house and entered. My wife, so emotionally exhausted, had passed out in the bed. I aroused her, awkward and sad moments ensued, and we retrieved the bike with my Silverado.

I was baffled by the bike issues and the Appalachian's apathy. I serviced my KTM for the cross-country sojourn just days before. After two excruciating days of living as awkward roommates, I loaded the bike in my 2001 Silverado and took 71 North

to Columbus. I stayed with my parents there for a few days while my bike was serviced by an experienced KTM mechanic. The problem—the Roanoke bike shop only replaced the three liter oil capacity with two liters during the oil change.

With my motorbike in working order, I decided to drive to New Mexico with the bike loaded in the truck's bed. This would save tire wear and increase my riding range once I was out west. Plus riding across the great Midwest of the USA to make time, a region I hold dear to my heart, is tedious and boring when mountains are your destination. Expediting this transit made sense. I arrived in Santa Fe two days later.

My soul friend and his wife were amazing hosts. They served as my refuge, my therapists, and my best friends over the next weeks.

My godfather, an avid adventure motorcyclist, world traveler, and former CEO of Cardinal Industries, had lent me Neil Peart's book, *Ghost Rider*. Neil Peart, the drummer for the successful progressive rock band Rush, is one of us. He's an adventure motorcyclist, many times hauling his BMW 1200GS behind the tour bus to take daily rides before performances. His book, his life, his story became my therapy during this shit-storm season of my life.

Neil, some say one of the best drummers of a generation, experienced catastrophic personal tragedy in the span of a year. He lost his only daughter to a single car accident, and then, a year later, lost his wife of two decades to cancer.

Just like me during my crisis, the only thing he knew to do was to get on his adventure motorcycle and ride. So he set out on a multi-year trip that covered over fifty-thousand miles from Mexico to Alaska.

His thesis, embodied by his title, *Ghost Rider*, resonated with me. He was a ghost of his former self, unsure if he cared about anything or liked anything anymore. While I hadn't experience the level of tragedy he had, a separation from the Appalachian, at this point in my life, was the most devastating and difficult thing I had encountered. So for the next few weeks, Neil Peart kept me company.

I remember reading, several hundred pages into his book, that while riding in the Rocky Mountains of the US, Neil realized that he still liked things. He realized that below all the shit, the grief, the hell was a slimmer of hope and joy. A reason to live.

"Do I still like things? Yes, yes I do." I realized that I would be ok in the alpine mountains of Northern New Mexico as I rambled around the Enchanted Circle. This was the first full day I had been in New Mexico, three days since the split. I knew I would be okay. Tomorrow I would ride to the Christ in the Desert Monastery.

In 2010, I took seven Texas Christian University students on an interfaith service and study trip to Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, a Presbyterian conference center where Georgia O'Keeffe painted and lived, and *City Slickers* was filmed. In addition, we visited the Upaya Zen Center, Dar Al Islam Mosque, the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis Cathedral, Hacienda de Guru Ram Das Ashram (the largest Sikh community in the USA), El Santuario de Chimayó (the most popular pilgrimage site in the USA), and we tried to get to Christ in the Desert. But since the 15 mile winding, cliff-side dirt road was washed out due to rain, we had to turn around after about a mile.

I promised myself that I would return. And on day four of my exile, I rode my trusty KTM, that I christened "John the Baptist," beyond Ghost Ranch to the cut off road that winds back to Christ in the Desert.

Echoing the words of Rush's drummer, I growled over the v-twin's growl, "it's time for the healing road!" I rolled on the EFI controlled throttle, popping the front wheel several feet in the air, higher than ever before, to a point where fear of falling backwards flashed through my mind. That flash of angst prompted a quick reaction on the controls to level the bike out on the ground. "Now," I thought to myself thinking how good it was to have two wheels on the ground, "it's time to see what this thing can do."

With the GoPro camera rolling, I devoured the 15 miles of snaking, cliff-adjacent two-track. I rode with purpose and passion. I had to show myself that I was still good at something, that I still was worth something. And of course I was, in God's eyes, in my family's eyes, and even in my wife's eyes. But that feeling of shocking grief brought me to a place I had never been, so low, close to despair. But riding gave me hope, it helped me access those parts of me that couldn't be broken by a broken heart. I rode to a place of courage and strength, tucked deep down below my knowledge of myself, that was the source of my faith, God's home. In this, the darkest crisis of my life to date, I didn't overtly pray to Jesus or read the bible or go to church or any other of the typical Christian things. I rode my motorcycle to a place where my soul was completely bare, and I saw that it was good and something to be proud of. I accessed in that place a faith in God, in my family and friends to help me through this, and in my self that was more profound than words. It was a faith that existed prior to words, was greater than words. It was pre- and sub-conscious. It was poetical and powerful. It transcended any understanding of God that I possessed. On that ride to Christ in the Desert, I wrestled with the mystery of faith, again, like I was Jacob becoming Israel at the well, and found that it was good and I realized I would never be the same. Riding my motorcycle, "John the Baptist," I

encountered the wilderness of my soul, like I was the biblical John the Baptist in the desert, clothed in camel's hair, eating locusts and honey. From that point on, I began to heal. And as John the Baptist did in the Gospel of John, I began to prepare myself to point to Christ's love in the world and perceive my faith and my faith in God in a new way.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>32</sup>

The author of Mark connects what was written in Isaiah with John the Baptist's time in the wilderness, which helps to frame our understanding in regards to the broader theological history. “In its own context, Isaiah 40:3 looks for God's intervention to restore Israel from Babylonian exile. For Mark, John is like the voice that announces comfort to the exiles in Babylon.”<sup>33</sup> And though the Jews at that time were not in exile, they suffered under occupation. And John the Baptist's spiritual equipped by his experiences in the desert, offered solace and good news to the suffering people by

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<sup>32</sup> Mark 1: 1-8.

<sup>33</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 45.

pointing to the divine. I needed that message at this time in my life. And hopefully, I will be able to share that message with others in the future.

But, of course, I still had a long and painful journey down the healing road. This arid desert two-track proved a pivotal epiphany, but my life was still in chaotic disarray. Intoxicated with the adrenaline of crisis and adventure, I almost felt normal, but of course, that Band-aid wouldn't last. Now the true process of healing begins.

I rolled up to Christ in the Desert Monastery, a totally sustainable and off-the-grid community. The infamous Thomas Merton explored moving his residency from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky to this more remote, Trappist monastery after his visit in 1968. Merton dubbed it the best monastic building in the country, but his tragic death later that year, kept him from returning.

The solar panels sparkled and contrasted with the earthen-red adobe structure of the chapel. Monks worked in the gardens, harvesting food for the evening meal. Guests and retreaters hiked the grounds and walked the labyrinth.

As I marveled at the rich and profound connection between Christianity and the environment on display here, I wondered why much of American religion seems to have at best an apathy for environmentalism and sustainability and at most a hostility towards it. We have much to learn from Christ in the Desert, a place where humans live spiritually examined lives in harmony with the ecosystem. But the institutional monsters of capitalism and hedonism obliterate the possibility of sustainability before the conversation can even begin. Maybe, we should merely and frankly admit we are too selfish and debauched, using Jesus as a mascot for luxury and comfort, to put forth the

effort and sacrifice required to live like these monks, to live as Christianity, as God, or even logic, prescribes.

The lyrics to the poem, *Night-Flowering Cactus*, by Merton flashed in front of my memory,

I know my time, which is obscure, silent and brief  
For I am present without warning one night only.

When sun rises on the brass valleys I become serpent.

Though I show my true self only in the dark and to no man  
(For I appear by day as serpent)  
I belong neither to night nor day.

Sun and city never see my deep white bell  
Or know my timeless moment of void:  
There is no reply to my munificence.

When I come I lift my sudden Eucharist  
Out of the earth's unfathomable joy  
Clean and total I obey the world's body  
I am intricate and whole, not art but wrought passion  
Excellent deep pleasure of essential waters  
Holiness of form and mineral mirth:

I am the extreme purity of virginal thirst.

I neither show my truth nor conceal it  
My innocence is described dimly  
Only by divine gift  
As a white cavern without explanation.

He who sees my purity  
Dares not speak of it.  
When I open once for all my impeccable bell  
No one questions my silence:  
The all-knowing bird of night flies out of my mouth.

Have you seen it? Then though my mirth has quickly ended  
You live forever in its echo:  
You will never be the same again.

Since seminary, I have been enamored and profoundly influenced by Thomas Merton and the Cistercian monastic movement. My two soul-friends from seminary and I used to regularly visit the Abbey of Gethsemani and attend the holy offices. One seminary classmate developed a close mentor/mentee relationship with one of the monks. Barnabus, a veteran monk from Cleveland, Ohio, settled into a spiritual teacher role to us. We'd go on spiritual retreat for the weekend and Barnabus would eat with us, pray with us, and challenge us spiritually. He became the human, effable face of the holy and not-of-this-earth monastic life. We began visiting Gethsemani to get close to the unattainable righteousness of monks and we left with a drastically different understanding of faith. Barnabus debunked the romantic myth of holy perfection by his dry-sense of humor, his candid anecdotes and sordid tales of community life, and his imperfect personal faith story. For us, Barnabus articulated the human, mundane, vulnerable side of faith, one which all three of us desperately needed.

Merton's poem personifies the desert plant which blooms only at night, sometimes as infrequently as once a year. As an allegory for faith, its symbolism and coincidence to my situation is profound. Merton's lyrics propagate the reality of faithfulness, of spiritual transformation, that we learned from Barnabus. At that moment on the grounds of Christ in the Desert, I was the night-flowering cactus blooming in the cold darkness.

Similar to the serpent-like plant, for days and months and years, I experienced life the same way, often mundane and pre-occupied. And then, deep in the moonlight of a midnight crisis, it happened. My anxieties and defenses were stripped away. My ideas of myself, my expectations, and my romantic visions of my life of faith disappeared. This



crisis, though somewhat tragic, revealed my true self and my true faith, in this, my long dark night of the soul. In this vulnerability, I saw, like the night-flowering cactus and its bloom, that I was made in the image of God and it was good. And I would never be the same.

Immediately, shivers of spiritual realization ricocheted through my body, manifesting emotions of joy, peace, and then fear. “So what do I do, now that I know?” Tears cascaded down, splashing of the padding of my closed-face helmet. “I can’t stop. I must keep riding.”

So without even dismounting the KTM, I left the monastery and returned to my friend’s house. I don’t remember the ride back to Santa Fe.

One week later, I commenced my sojourn to Lake Tahoe, CA to officiate my cousin’s wedding. Even after my spiritual awakening at the monastery one week prior, I was struggling. I was exhausted. But riding from Santa Fe to Lake Tahoe was the medicine I needed.

I left my truck in Santa Fe and twisted the throttle west. The first day was uneventful, but stunning scenery invigorated the senses and spirits. The second day I will remember forever.

After refueling in Caliente, NV, I rode on. The desert was as immense as my heartbreak. I could see for miles down the road and into my soul.

Just after leaving the town, I climbed up out of the desert valley to a mountain pass. Atrophied desert landscape turned to conifers, bushes, and boulders. I quickly approached a Chevy Malibu creeping along at 55 mph. I began to move into the left-lane to pass, but for some reason, I chose to remain behind the inconvenient vehicle.

Then, everything slowed down, slower than slow-motion. In my periphery, an enormous white blur darted out from behind the rocks on the right berm. Then, my view became hyper-focused. A snow-white wild horse, the size of a Kentucky Derby thoroughbred, galloped directly into the path of the automobile, only 50 feet in front of me. Surreally, the car struck the horse without breaking. The front end flipped the equine over the hood, with its back crashing into the windshield glass. The momentum of the 55 mph speed of the vehicle caused the horse to fly ten feet into the air spinning horizontally almost two full times. I remember one point where the horse's four legs were pointing towards the noon sun.

I stomped the brakes, swerved around broken pieces of the car, and pulled right behind the disabled vehicle. The horse landed violently in the road, immediately rose to its feet and ran 50 yards, and then collapsed behind a tree, writhing in pain. Then, motionless.

I rushed to the badly damaged vehicle. Two men stumbled out of the car. "Are you guys alright?" I shrieked in desperate hope. And luckily, or graciously, they weren't hurt physically, only emotionally shocked. Carl and David had flown to Las Vegas from Michigan for a bachelor party and decided to rent a car and explore the Grand Canyon, the parks in Utah, and now were headed to Yosemite.

They noticed my Michigan license plate that I still had on my bike. I turned out that Emily and I had lived only 20 miles away from these guys during our stint in Jonesville. What a weird world it sometimes is.

I called 911 and the cops and animal control were dispatched. Carl and David said I should get on my way, that they'd be fine. So I did.

As I was accelerating further west into Nevada's desert wilderness, I reminded myself that, no, this wasn't a dream. That experience was so visceral, violent, and strange, I couldn't believe it was real. "If I had passed those guys like I wanted to, that horse would've killed me." It was almost as if I had watched myself observe that surreal event, like I was outside of my body. I remember having to intentionally tell myself that I could continue to ride on, that while my life was stranger than imaginable, I could motor through it. Looking back, that place in my soul that I found at Christ in the Desert gave me the faith to continue.

That night, after the marvel of Yosemite and the majesty of Lake Tahoe, I arrived at my cousin's house in Tahoe Vista on the north shore of the lake. When my cousin and his fiancé asked me to officiate their wedding, I imagined a weekend of shared bliss with my wife. I was such an honor to be asked, first of all. And the wedding was in such a paradise location.

But now, with my broken marriage, the juxtaposition of their happiness and my sorrow, especially in my role as the minister, created such a mess of emotional shit in me, I almost couldn't function. But I trudged on--with help from my family, from surprising friends whom I wouldn't have predicted, from my therapist, from craft beer and whiskey, and I guess, from God. Although I wasn't really able to perceive God at the time, I suppose God was there. The other stuff definitely was.

The week with my family and the wedding ceremony proved to be superb medicine. I waved goodbye to my worried mother and rode east. Massive forest fires in the region smothered the Reno area with cough-inducing smoke. Pedestrians and cyclists wore masks. Again, I was suffocating. But at least I was moving.

At 9pm, I arrived at Salina, Utah at the junction of I-70. Rain increased intensity in direct relationship to the disappearing daylight. I should have stopped there. I suppose I yearned to keep traveling to avoid facing the pain I was feeling. Riding pre-occupied me. If I stopped, it would begin to hurt a lot more.

I rode up the access ramp onto the interstate. It was cold, dark, wet. Then, I spied a sign that read, “No Services for 100 miles.” Those were the most treacherous, most ill-advised miles I have ever ridden. Grief and pain obscure decision-making.

Miraculously, I remained safe through the pitch-blackness and monsoon-like rain. My vision was so limited that it seemed I was riding by feel, by intuition, maybe even, by faith.

The next morning I retraced the route that my wife and I had ridden together three years prior—through Moab, Canyonlands, and down the Million Dollar Highway to Durango, Colorado. Reminiscence served as balm.

I returned to Santa Fe. Over the next week, my seminary friend and I caught rainbows on the Red River, drank craft beer on the Plaza, and hiked the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. But now it was time to get back to Virginia, get back to work, and see if I still had a house and a marriage.

With the bike loaded in the bed, I drove my trusty Chevy Silverado through New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. As I was about to cross into Arkansas, traveling at 80 mph on the interstate on a 100 degree day, I heard an ear-piercing crash-bang and simultaneously felt the rear of the truck drop down to the road. In the side-view mirror, I saw sparks flying as I lost control of the vehicle. I swerved into the left of the two eastbound lanes, then briefly into the median grass. I over-corrected the swerve trying to

avoid the oncoming lanes and entered into a 360 degree spin in the middle of the road. At one point, time stood still as the truck spun and faced backwards against the flow of traffic. I remember looking into the scared eyes of a 50 year-old, mustachioed man in an F-150 as he was making a dramatic maneuver to avoid me. Briefly, I truly thought I was dead.

As metal ripped through the tarmac, I finally corrected the truck and came to a stop on the right-hand berm, once again facing the correct direction. Immediately, an ambulance came to my assistance. A passerby saw me lose control and called in an accident. Thankfully, I, and everyone else, avoided harm.

Nancy and John, the paramedics, assisted me in changing my tire and keeping me safe from the speeding traffic. The tread had totally separated from the tire body and instantly the metal alloy rim made contact with the road. The tire was absolutely obliterated. And so were my nerves. The fact that the truck didn't roll over was unfathomable. The fact that I avoided all other vehicles on a busy interstate was fantastic and far-fetched. The sheer violence and deadly sound of the event would continue to haunt me for days. After the incident with the horse and now this, I came as close as one could to nothingness, to non-existence. I had almost been stripped of everything, even my life. Looking death in the eye, I was changed forever. There is nothing to be afraid of anymore. The only thing that exists, that is true, is the journey. I have faith in the journey. I think that may be God.

I thanked my new friends and heroes Nancy and John for their kind help, truly Good Samaritans and Angels from God in my time of need, and continued to Fort Smith. I checked into a hotel and passed out from fear and exhaustion.

The next day, travelling at a much slower clip, I returned home. Though it was difficult, the Appalachian and I eventually reconciled our relationship. We worked through issues, went to counseling, and did some soul searching. In retrospect, we realized that Virginia and our jobs were not a good fit for us. We weren't necessarily unhappy with each other, but unhappy with our living and working situations.

Like a red life-preserver thrown overboard to save a drowning couple, the Appalachian was recruited for her dream job with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) Young Adult Volunteer Program back in our home of homes, Louisville, KY. Gladly, but cautiously I moved back with her, making it my third time in two years I took the role of the trailing spouse.

She transitioned into her new role with gusto and satisfaction. She was happier than I'd ever seen her. But for me, while I was much happier with our relationship and with the community, I struggled to find work. Application, after, application. Interview, after interview. Nothing.

## CHAPTER 6: PILGRIMAGE III: CIRCUITAL GRACE, COMING HOME

Summer came around and I was jobless. It was time to finish the third and final installment of my pilgrimage. It was time to take a circuital route around the entire country and return back to where I started again, ala my spiritual teacher and swimming partner, Jim James of *My Morning Jacket*, whose album *Circuital* has informed the spiritual thesis of this memoir.

*Circuital*<sup>34</sup>  
Spinning out, gracefully  
Going nowhere, quickly  
I am older, day to day  
Still going back to my childhood way

Circuital  
Round and round patiently  
Getting lost by the guide  
And I'm all worked up over nothing

Circuits  
All in and out  
Connect my body  
Deep into the ground

Circuits  
Connect the Earth to the Moon  
And link our heavenly bodies  
Not a moment too soon

Well you can fling open the windows  
Or you can board 'em up  
Saints to a crown  
Or Christ's humble cup

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<sup>34</sup> Lyrics by Jim James of *My Morning Jacket*

You think you'll find yourself out there  
Out in the lion's den  
In somebody's battle  
Over belief systems

Or disappear into the vacuum  
Total neutrality  
Well you can't lose nothing  
But nothing can be gained

Well anyway you cut it  
We're just spinning around  
Out on the circuits  
Over the hollow grounds

Out on the circuits  
Over the hollow grounds  
Heading right back in the same place  
That we started out  
Right back in the same place  
Right back in the same place  
That we starting out

I met Jim James, the frontman of My Morning Jacket and author of those lyrics, and talked with him three times in a Louisville area aquatic center that winter. By the beginning of this final voyage, we were old friends. Those lyrics of “heading right back in the same place that we started out” ring so true and poignant in this situation. My wife and I met in Louisville, fell in love in Louisville, went on a circuital adventure together, and have returned with new eyes and new hearts to the Derby City next to the Falls of the Ohio. But now it was time to complete my circuital adventure on the motorbike.

I left Louisville on my KTM Adventure and over the next six weeks I would ride 12600 miles, making a continental-sized circle out to LA, up to Prudhoe Bay, across central Canada, and down through Michigan to my family's cottage on Lake George in Indiana.



At the end of my sojourn, when I rode up that familiar hill where our cottage, Breezy Banks, stands sentinel over the northern blue waters, I started sobbing uncontrollably. Three adventures. Three pilgrimages. This final one, massive, but different. I was at peace. I was home. I did it. Actually, no, that isn't true. I was brought through these journeys, to this place, but something transcendent.

From the beginning of this final pilgrimage, even before I left, I was ready to be home. And I mean "be at home" in a way I'd never before. I'd changed. I was at peace. My wanderlust subsided. My anxiety and angst diminished. I was different. From now on, I can always reach down into that part of myself that was exposed in Christ in the Desert and know that I am good and that there is hope. Like Jacob becoming Israel, I had "striven with God" and I would never be the same.

On this final pilgrimage, I finished some things that needed closure, or rather I was brought to closure through this pilgrimage, by something outside of myself. I revisited Texas Christian University and my close friend, a former colleague at the school. This was my dream job that I left. I turned out that it wasn't what I remembered. The craft IPA's at Ginger Man and the American Spirits tasted off. The campus and city felt shallow, strange, and off-putting. Even my friend was ready to get the hell out of there. Good riddance Texas.

I high-tailed it to LA and stayed at the beachfront apartment of my best high school friend, who was back in Ohio comforting his too-young-to-die dying father. His dad was a great man. I was staying in luxury on Hermosa Beach, but wanted to leave.

My dad's close motorcycle buddy met me in LA and we rode all the way up the PCH into Canada and then onto Anchorage. Other than my dad's friend running into me

at a traffic light, and a flat tire in Dawson City, the trip was uneventful, but pleasant enough. The weather was too nice and the landscapes and vistas seemed gentle and inviting. Where was the trill of the mountains, the ocean, the Great White North? It seemed too tame. It wasn't adventure, it was just easy.

The Appalachian arrived for a ten-day vacation with me in Alaska, but it wasn't what we expected. While we had some amazing experiences like seeing Denali, whale-watching in Kenai-Fjords, and staying on the Homer Spit; our host, my uncle, had a knee operation and my dad's friend came down with influenza. Many of our days we served as caretakers, running my uncle to the hospital and helping dad's motorcycle buddy get better. The weather also caused us to cancel several excursions we had planned.

Slightly disappointed, but thankful for the experiences we did have, the Appalachian flew back home and I began the return leg of my trip. First, I needed to conquer the Dalton highway up to Prudhoe Bay. It was a monumental and enormous journey that challenged my riding skills and my motorcycle maintenance knowledge. The road surface north of the Arctic Circle was sloppy, deep mud, but my KTM stayed true and I stayed off the ground. The temperature in the tundra 100 miles from the end of the road dipped to 15 degrees, forcing me to wear my boxer shorts on my head to protect my face. Who would have thought I'd be putting underwear on my head to protect me from the elements? Sometimes adventure demands creative problem solving. I made it to the destination, the dark, cold, foggy oil town of Deadhorse.

Deadhorse, is the farthest away point on the pilgrimage, geographically from home. It was an otherworldly place. Dark, depressing, cold, and almost uninhabitable. It symbolizes the last and deepest state of loneliness, of darkness. Ironically, it was the

place I most prized visiting. If only I could ride all the way to Deadhorse, I would achieve something great, I thought to myself. But it turned out this place was something totally different. It was hell. I arrived at this place, my personal hell, so that I could truly return home, and entertain, even if slightly, to live in my own personal heaven.

The next morning I headed south towards home. Over the next several days, I encountered two mechanical issues. The first was an extremely loose drive chain. I put my mechanical knowledge to work and tightened the chain on the side of the Northernmost highway in America. Then days later, I discovered I was leaking petrol from the gas tank. I found the leak and with some ingenuity and several tools, solved the problem.

I rode across the gigantic plains region of Canada and encountered the rainiest, coldest days of the trip. I crossed over in the North Dakota and rode through Minnesota, Wisconsin, and into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I rode along the southern coast of Lake Superior, stopped at Pictured Rocks National Lake Shore, crossed the Mackinaw Bridge, and camped at Sleeping Bear Dunes. Michigan boasts some of the most impressive natural features, rivaling much of what I saw along the Pacific Coast Highway.

Then I rode through a dreadfully powerful lake-effect thunderstorm almost the entire last day to Lake George, Indiana, 100 yards across the border of Michigan. And I chose to end my pilgrimage there because that cottage on Lake George is a sacred place to me. It's the only place that has remained constant in my entire life. It's been in my family for generations and I have many powerful, meaningful memories there. Lake George is where my soul is at home.

Only two weeks later I would apply for and eventually be offered a dream job, Executive Director of a Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center in Southern, Indiana. It was at Geneva Hills Camp and Conference Center on our Hills Angels motorcycle pilgrimages that my story of these pilgrimages began. And now twenty-five years later, I would be graced with the privilege to serve in a similar ministry. Now that my story has come full circle or has undergone a sort of circuital grace, if you will, it's time to start planning the second installment of the Hills Angels motorcycle pilgrimage at my new place of ministry Pyoca Camp, Conference, and Retreat Center. Maybe, I will call it Pyoca's Pilgrims.

## **POSTLOGUE**

### **GOING GONZO IN THE PC(USA): BRINGING THE ROAD TO THE CHURCH**

I have served as the Executive Director of Pyoca Camp, Conference, and Retreat Center now for 5 months. It's almost May. Overnight, spring is greening the landscape. Summer camp, our biggest program of the year, is only a few weeks away. My dark, spiritual winter is over, at least for now.

The purpose, in reflection, of the 3 stage pilgrimage was to move towards a transformed, re-integrated relationship with my wife, with God, with myself and to become better equipped to serve here at Pyoca. I had to experience the Jobian stripping, to go through the dark night of the soul, to be transformed, in order to become more faithful in my relationships (wife, God, self) and more skillful in my vocation.

I realize that this place, Pyoca, was the place I was moving towards. Over the course those three life-altering journeys, I dealt with issues of identity including loneliness and being an outsider. I encountered the stripping away of my marriage, my jobs, my home. I wrestled with my views of God. I, then, moved towards re-integration in my relationships, my identity, my faith. I assumed a new existence, strengthened and transformed. And it was the journey that changed me. It was encountering the special

and unique community on the road. It was those people, those diverse and multicultural people out on the road, who formed a spiritual community that ministered to me.

Similarly to my previous vocation as a hospital chaplain, I traveled around performing a ministry of presence, being blessed with the privilege of witnessing the sacred stories of others. These people invited me into their lives, and I truly saw them. And like when served as a hospital chaplain, it wasn't me ministering to others. Most often, it was those who I would meet, that would invite me into their lives, who did the ministering to me. This connection, this sacred presence is powerful and transformative. It's the presence of Christ. This is what the road can teach the church. This is how the institution of the PC(USA) and others can 'go gonzo.'

Camp and conference centers serve similar functions and share characteristics with pilgrimage. Pyoca is set aside as a spiritual place for those to travel to: so that they may grow in faith, meet new and different people, overcome challenges, and become transformed. There is the same going out, being challenged, and then re-integrating into home life again.

Pyoca can be the example of the diverse, spiritual, loving community in the church which begins to create change. Pyoca is both a mission of the PC(USA) and multifaith, it is both ecumenical and secular. On the same day we've served a Baha'i youth school and work group from a local automotive factory. There exists a diversity in race, age, politics, sexual orientation, geography, and nationality. Even churches that have left our denomination due to the gay ordination/marriage issue still come to Pyoca and remain part of the community. It is a voice for justice, environmentalism, and can speak truth to power due to its more marginal existence as part of the institution.

Most importantly Pyoca can serve as a ministry of presence, bearing witness to the sacred stories of the community. And in this, the true connection and presence of Christ transforms.

The characteristic of the church that is most threatening to this possible transformative reality is a lack of courage to embark upon the journey of faith, to go out and cross borders. The church is scared to change and be changed. It is hanging on to its current identity. It's almost as if the church is afraid of being changed into something different than the church. Sure, if we do this, we might totally change what it means to be church. But I believe that would be a blessing, maybe, the best and most faithful thing we could do. Therefore, must not be scared, we must embrace the journey. We must hop on our motorcycles, start the ignitions, turn the throttle, and immerse ourselves in the diverse, spiritual community of the road. That is how faith is created. That is how we are transformed.

## **APPENDIX I PROJECT PROPOSAL**

**ADVENTURES OF THE MOTORCYCLE PILGRIM: 50 FAITHS 50 STATES**

**BY: Rev. Raymond Jacob Hofmeister, M.Div.**

### **DEMONSTRATION PROJECT PROPOSAL**

**New York Theological Seminary**

**2013**

#### **Challenge Statement**

As an ordained PC(USA) minister, a college and hospital chaplain, and an adventure motorcyclist, I observe in the USA a fear or unwillingness to deeply interact with religiously diverse communities and a closed posture regarding opportunities for spiritual/religious growth and conversion, especially in multifaith contexts or contexts outside one's normal, comfortable religious home. If this issue is not explored and addressed, spiritual/religious identity and expression in the USA will become increasingly irrelevant to our current context and ineffective in addressing the newly arising issues of our rapidly changing culture. By taking an adventure motorcycle pilgrimage across the USA's religious landscape, I will explore the process of spiritual/religious conversion in a broad spiritual and multifaith context, serving as a model to inspire further spiritual exploration in the USA.



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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION TO SETTING**

My religious pilgrimage, upon my 2008 KTM Adventure 990 motorcycle, seeks understanding in our multifaith world of the 21st century. As a deeply religious person, I have tremendous inspiration to explore other faith traditions, learn stories from different communities, and wrestle with my discoveries. Embarking upon a pilgrimage via motorcycle as opposed to other means of transportation gives the pilgrim a deeper connectedness to the fragrance of the deciduous forest, the constant whoosh of the headwind, and the sweltering, warmth of the sunrays. A motorcycle can go where many other vehicles cannot. A motorcycle means more freedom, more opportunity to see and experience the splendor of nature and the strange beauty of the religious communities.

Adventure is how I live a spiritual life. Motorcycling is how I live out my faith. And I do it to reduce prejudice, misunderstandings, and injustice perpetuated by the lack of awareness of our country's religious diversity. And I do it to tell the stories that aren't told. And I do it for spiritual transformation.

So where did I get the idea for this interfaith motorcycle pilgrimage? Well, I guess you could say I grew up with it. Or better yet, I was born into it. As far back as I can remember, up until I was around 13 years old, I, with my mom, dad, and bro, went on a religious motorcycle pilgrimage every year. It was one of the most transformative ways I experienced God and expressed my spirituality in these developmental years. My parents, Ray and Mary Lou, were big motorcycle riders throughout their lives.

They even won the amateur national championship in sidecar ice racing in Salina, Kansas. I can just imagine my mom, as the monkey, leaning way out over the sidehack, with her head all but scraping on the ice.

So naturally, when our local Presbyterian Church camp, Geneva Hills in Lancaster, Ohio, created a week-long motorcycle trip as the final summer offering of the camp season, my parents didn't hesitate to sign up the whole family. My parents probably thought, "Combining the adventure of motorcycle riding with instilling good religious values for my children? We are there!" Who wouldn't love that?

So what was it the culture of Geneva Hills that lent itself to such a unique program offering? Geneva Hills' promoted the challenges of adventure and embracing diverse community as its primary spiritual identities. The camping grounds boasted an extensive high ropes course with a zip line course traversing a lake, Conestoga wagons for sleeping quarters, and cliffs and caves for rock climbing and spelunking—and adventurers playground. The directors John and Fay Batchelder were big motorcycle riders themselves. Next, Geneva Hills lies in close vicinity to central Ohio, which has a deep history of motorcycling and serves as the home of the American Motorcyclist Association (the largest national motorcycle rights and sanctioning group). Further, the location of the camp borders the Midwest and Appalachian mountain cultures, the staff at the camp hailed from various cultural and religious (though mostly Christian) backgrounds, and while the camp was owned by the Presbyterian Church (USA), Geneva Hills expressed its own personality of diversity. It became its own unique community, bringing together people from various backgrounds around the ideals of adventure, community, and spirituality.

That sort of environment at Geneva Hills, one that gathers around shared interest rather than similar backgrounds or culture, resembles motorcycling culture.

Motorcyclists commune around the shared love of riding which allows them to uniquely access adventure, freedom, and spirituality. While there does exist brand loyalty and certain groups gravitate towards homogeneity of riding styles, lifestyles, or dress, generally motorcycle culture welcomes everyone and celebrates the variety of individual personalities. Doctrine, dogma, ideologies, and labels are superficial. These shared traits made a group motorcycle pilgrimage a perfect fit with the Geneva Hills culture.

So I was seven or so and my brother was four or five the first year. Mom threw me on the back of her Low Rider Harley and Dad threw my four-year-old bro, Kyle, in the side car of his BMW boxer. Kyle hesitated initially, but when my father lured Kyle into the seat with a half dozen Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figurines, Kyle turned into a most laidback motorcycle passenger, often falling asleep in the bottom of the car.

So we made the 40-minute ride to Geneva Hills. As we turned into the gravel drive that began winding back into the wooded hills of Southern Ohio, we noticed several other bikes behind us. We pulled up to the lodge and saw about 12 bikes total. All different makes: BMWs, Hondas, Kawasakis, Triumphs, Harleys, and Suzukis. Some of the riders were pastors, some were lay people, some were beginners, some were experts, some were retired, all were Christian—though many of us different kinds.

Later on, during the trip, as we all stopped at a scenic view pull-off on the Blue Ridge Parkway, a passerby came up to talk to us. As I mentioned before, brand homogeneity is the stereotyped truth of motorcycle culture. Harley riders ride together. BMW riders ride together. Honda riders ride together. So this stranger approached us,

and he noticed that we were all together, but all riding different brands of motorcycles. He said, “You guys must be Christian...because that’s the only way that a Harley rider would be caught dead with BMW and a Honda rider!” We all laughed. And that’s the first time I realized, something deeper than brand loyalty brought us together. We were Christian. We cared about religion and spirituality. Sure, we rode for the fun, the camaraderie, and the adventure. But there was an even deeper reason. We were on a religious pilgrimage.

I remember vividly that first night around a big table with a fire near by in the main lodge where everyone gathers for camp. John and Fay Batchelder, were the directors of Geneva Hills, and big motorcycle riders themselves. They gave an orientation for the week ahead: we were going to ride our motorcycle from Ohio down to North Carolina and back in a week. And along the way we were going to stop at a different church camp or religious community at night. They told us we participate in evening worship, lead prayers, and sing songs (Fay was an excellent guitar player). And that the point of the trip was to deepen our relationship with God, with each other, with the communities we visit, and with nature. The motorcycle was just the vehicle to achieve this more important end. So that began 6 or 7 years of religious pilgrimages on a motorcycle. And that began, at the age of seven, the formation of the foundation of my spiritual essence—adventure (on a motorcycle).

Our misfit motorcycle gang dubbed ourselves ‘Hills Angels,’ a less-than-comical combination of Geneva Hills Church Camp and the legendary Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang. We rode from church camp to church camp, to religious community to retreat center. We stopped, visited, and shared meals with Mormons in Ohio, Mennonites in

Kentucky, and Methodists North Carolina. We stayed at camps run by Seventh-Day Adventists in New York, Presbyterians in Michigan, and non-denoms in Iowa. We even visited a Jewish camp in Pennsylvania and a secular community in Virginia. We saw the peaks of the Appalachian, the beaches of the Atlantic, the fury of Niagara Falls, and the towering dunes of Lake Michigan.

We met so many different people, heard so many inspiring faith stories, and saw so many new parts of God's creation. We built lasting relationships and became family. Looking back, I realize that my parents instilled in me, my particular style of faith. A family's influence, especially parents' influence, plays a major and fundamental role in the faith and spiritual development of an individual, possibly that most crucial of any factor. It's the task of growing into spiritual maturity, taking this influence and challenging it, disagreeing with parts, and incorporating others into one's soul, and then we are to make it our own. I learned to express my faith and experience the divine through adventuring on a motorcycle. It's so central to my spiritual identity that it feels as if it has always been present, and it will always remain. That's why I do my Christianity, my spirituality on a motorcycle--because it's in my bones. And from the legacy of my parents and my Geneva Hills family, this multifaith motorcycle pilgrimage is how I am making my faith, my own.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGE**

#### **The Problem**

The current religious and spiritual climate in the USA is changing drastically due to several factors: a rapid increase of religious diversity, globalization, technology, and unceasing communication. Religious or spiritual identity and expression in the 21st century USA has begun to rapidly change and transform due to these newly arising factors. The current religious institutions do not have adequate answers to questions that face the modern day person in the USA. Questions like: How do we acknowledge and affirm truth in a diversity of religions while staying true to our own? How is the bible relevant to a culture that is driven by technological advancement and global capitalism? How do we interpret the stories of faith in light of the environmental crisis, in terms of the systemic injustice inflicted upon the LGBTQ community, or through the ubiquity of social media? What about people that are spiritual not religious, prefer not to label their spirituality, have multiple religious identities, or are atheist activists who work with religious communities to improve our communities? Or maybe the most pressing question, how do faith communities change and adapt to the new focus of religious people on experience and relationship and justice rather than the previous focus on belief and doctrine and physical buildings? Or maybe the most fundamental question, how are we to be a particular religious self when we know so much of other religious selves?

On my motorcycle journey, I will be exploring some of these questions through a personal pilgrimage, by observation and conversation, by personal reflection and deep experience, and by adventuring into the unknown in order to open myself to strange and wonderful and hopefully providential happenings. And maybe, just maybe, I will be able to gain some insight on the monumental challenge we face in being religious/spiritual in 21st century America.

My method is postmodern and grassroots. I am hoping to start out without preconceived notions on what I hope to achieve, because that bias may close me off to opportunities of transformation. I will be inviting personal spiritual change. I am not holding anything back, willing to lose much of what I think I am, in order to be open to whatever happens on this pilgrimage. My hunch is that is what it takes to live authentic religious existence today.

### **CHALLENGE STATEMENT**

As an ordained PC(USA) minister, a college and hospital chaplain, and an adventure motorcyclist, I observe in the USA a fear or unwillingness to deeply interact with religiously diverse communities and a closed posture regarding opportunities for spiritual/religious growth and conversion, especially in multifaith contexts or contexts outside one's normal, comfortable religious home. If this issue is not explored and addressed, spiritual/religious identity and expression in the USA will become increasingly irrelevant to our current context and ineffective in addressing the newly arising issues of our rapidly changing culture. By taking an adventure motorcycle pilgrimage across the USA's religious landscape, I will explore the process of spiritual/religious conversion in a broad spiritual and multifaith context, serving as a model to inspire further spiritual exploration in the USA.



### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION**

**Goal 1:** Raise awareness of the problem before embarking upon my motorcycle pilgrimage

**Strategy 1:** Blog

**Strategy 2:** Social Media

**Strategy 3:** Practice Ride/Test Run

**Evaluation:** 500 blog site visits, practice ride completed.

**Goal 2:** Develop team, prepare for trip, take trip.

**Strategy 1:** Develop criteria for team, build team, cast vision.

**Strategy 2:** Create trip, prepare route and itinerary, prepare motorcycle and gear.

**Strategy 3:** Embark upon adventure motorcycle pilgrimage.

**Evaluation:** 5 team members actively participate, prepare trip itinerary that spans at least 2 weeks and 5 states, take trip for at least 2 weeks and visit 5 states.

**Goal 3:** Document the pilgrimage and the experience of conversion.

**Strategy 1:** Create journal to document pilgrimage and experience.

**Strategy 2:** Take photos and video.

**Strategy 3:** Create blog to communicate journal and photos/video to supporters and my community.

**Evaluation:** Completion of blog with journal entries, photo, and video with 10 entries

## **CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **SOCIAL SCIENCES, RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

What is the history of Adventure Motorcycling? What are the nuts and bolts of embarking on an adventure motorcycle journey? What is the landscape of America's religious diversity where the journey will take place?

### **SCRIPTURAL**

How does Mark 1:1-8 support, explore, and evolve the Judeo-Christian theme of pilgrimage through the wilderness?

#### **The Proclamation of John the Baptist**

**1** The beginning of the good news[a] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.[b]

**2** As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,[c]

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,[d] who will prepare your way; **3** the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

**4** John the baptizer appeared[e] in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. **6** Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. **8** I have baptized you with[f] water; but he will baptize you with[g] the Holy Spirit.”

### **INTERNAL, SPIRITUAL**

What is the history, theology, and anthropology of conversion in the Christian and broader contexts?

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **EVALUATION PROCESS**

#### **METHOD 1**

I will chronicle my pilgrimage in blog form and then reflect upon my experience through the lens of conversion in a multifaith, broader spiritual context.

#### **METHOD 2**

I will create an adventure motorcycling book, a travel memoir of sorts, as just one possible model to creatively experience pilgrimage and conversion in today's religiously diverse USA in order to meet the unique spiritual needs of our time and place and community.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES**

#### **Competency 1 Motorcycle Maintenance**

##### **Strategy 1**

Learn how to change a tire tube in case of a flat on the road.

##### **Strategy 2**

Learn how to change oil.

##### **Strategy 3**

Learn how to map EFI (Electronic Fuel Injection) with computer.

#### **Evaluation for Competency 1**

Change a tube, change oil, map EFI.

#### **Competency 2 Multi-religious Proficiency**

##### **Strategy 1**

Read books about religious diversity, interfaith cooperation, and pluralism.

##### **Strategy 2**

Read scripture from various traditions.

##### **Strategy 3**

Visit various religious communities.

#### **Evaluation for Competency 2**

Read 3 books on religious diversity, read 2 sacred texts from non-Christian traditions, visit 3 non-Christian communities.

### **Competency 3 Spiritual Leader**

#### **Strategy 1**

Develop the spiritual practice of journaling

#### **Strategy 2**

Develop the spiritual practice of pilgrimage.

#### **Strategy 3**

Develop the spiritual practice of motorcycling and motorcycle maintenance.

### **Evaluation for Competency 3**

Completion of a journal, complete a written reflection on the spirituality of my pilgrimage, complete a written reflection on the spirituality of motorcycling and how to use it as a vehicle for conversion.

**APPENDICES 1 AND 2  
TIMELINE AND BUDGET**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Task/Activity</b>	<b>Tools to Complete Task</b>	<b>Person</b>
<b>1/15/14</b>	<b>Meet with Site Team</b>	<b>Skype</b>	<b>RJH and Site Team</b>
<b>2/1/14</b>	<b>Research 1,2,3</b>	<b>Books, Site Team</b>	<b>RJH and Site Team</b>
<b>3/1/14</b>	<b>Ministerial Competencies 1,2,3</b>	<b>Books, Site Team especially Jeremy Turner</b>	<b>RJH and Site Team</b>
<b>3/15/14</b>	<b>Social Media</b>	<b>Facebook, Twitter</b>	<b>RJH</b>
<b>4/1/14</b>	<b>Itinerary and Gear</b>	<b>Site Team, motorcycle</b>	<b>RJH</b>
<b>4/15/14</b>	<b>Finish draft of writing and research prior to embarking</b>	<b>Resources, Site Team</b>	<b>RJH</b>
<b>5/1/14</b>	<b>Embark upon pilgrimage</b>	<b>Motorcycle, Site Team</b>	<b>RJH</b>
<b>6/15/14</b>	<b>Finish pilgrimage and journal</b>	<b>Computer, Blog</b>	<b>RJH</b>
<b>9/14</b>	<b>Full Draft Submitted</b>	<b>RJH, Site Team, NYTS</b>	<b>RJH</b>
<b>1/15</b>	<b>Final Draft</b>	<b>RJH, Site Team, NYTS</b>	<b>RJH</b>
<b>5/15</b>	<b>Graduation</b>		
<b>BUDGET</b>			

<b>Item</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Total</b>	
<b>Motorcycle Maintenance for 12- 15k mile trip</b>	<b>2k</b>		
<b>Gas</b>	<b>2k</b>		
<b>Lodging</b>	<b>1k</b>		
<b>Food</b>	<b>.5k</b>		
<b>camera, gps</b>	<b>1k</b>		
<b>Blog maintenance</b>	<b>.3k</b>		
<b>Brand, Logo</b>	<b>.3k</b>		
<b>Gear</b>	<b>.5k</b>		
<b>Editor</b>	<b>1k</b>		
		<b>8.6k</b>	

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